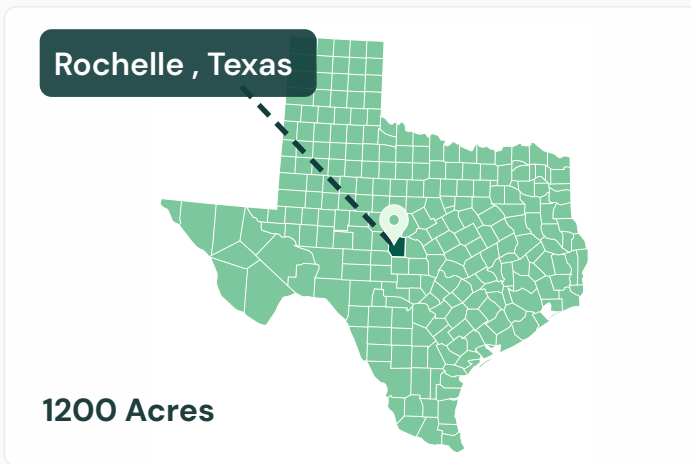


Restoring a tradition, building a legacy: The Sunrise W Ranch

When father and son Jim and Stephen West took back control of the land that had been in their family for 60 years, they decided to do things differently than ever before. Their animals and land are thriving.



Background



2
Species of
livestock



Cattle



Chicken

10
Varieties
of Grass



Results from Regeneration



Removed need for
cattle medication, fly
spray, and wormers



Eliminated cattle
feed costs



Ecological restoration
with bird diversity,
dung beetles, and
horned toads



Thriving grass species
despite drought

The Sunrise W Ranch thrives amidst a drought with healthier animals, soil, and grass – while earning income from carbon credits.

This summer, the farms and ranches throughout West Texas baked under recordbreaking heat and extreme drought. But the cattle at the Sunrise W Ranch, located about halfway between San Antonio and Midland, grew plump on thick, tall grass. Feed and medical costs were almost eliminated. Neighbors, initially skeptical when they saw ranch hands moving cattle daily, started to ask questions.

It's a dramatic change from how the land looked when Jim West returned home to what had been his grandfather's land just a few years before.

By 2020, he moved back to Texas after 24 years serving in the U.S. Marine Corps. His son, Stephen, had graduated with a degree in agriculture management from Texas A&M University. Jim purchased his grandfather's 600-acre cattle ranch and combined it with adjacent land he owned. The land was overgrazed and in terrible shape, but he and his son had a plan.

It had been 30 years of minimal management of the land. Very little had been done to take care of the property by the older generation after his grandfather died.

"There was practically no grass. We truly had to start from scratch," said Stephen West, Jim's son.

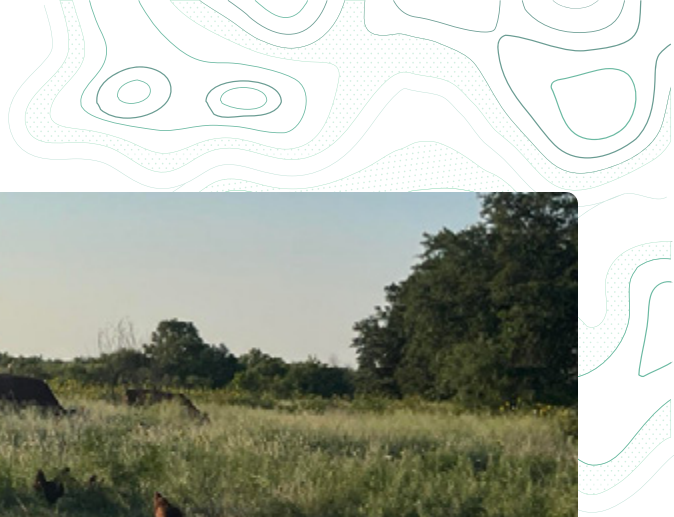


"There was practically no grass. We truly had to start from scratch."

Stephen West

Jim developed ideas on what might work on the family land from reading books from experts in soil health such as Gabe Brown, Joel Salatin, and Judith Schwartz as well as picking up ideas he observed while traveling the world in Japan, Iraq, The Philippines, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. When Stephen graduated with a degree in agricultural systems management and joined him, they got started.





Implementing a change

When cattle graze continuously, cattle eat grass faster than it can grow back. They also tend to prefer certain species of grass, which can reduce biodiversity and impact soil erosion.

On top of that, the West land was covered with wild mesquite trees that sucked the moisture from the soil, choking out any new grass growth.

Before they changed anything about the way they worked with their animals, the Wests started mechanically clearing the land of the mesquite trees and their saplings, careful not to damage the soil.



We haven't bought hay all year and we don't plan on it. We have more grass than we have cattle, and that's a great problem to have."

Stephen West

They then seeded the ground with 10 varieties of deep-rooted grass and gave each segment a year for the grasses to take root. Then they started building a new herd, one that they'd take care of differently than anyone had on that land.

Shifting to high-density stock grazing

They started moving the herd daily, timing it around noon. That encouraged the cattle that had been eating only in the morning and evening into a third daily feeding, eaten right when they moved into a fresh pasture.

Even though the cattle eat more, the costs are down because they haven't spent any money on feed.

"We haven't bought hay all year and we don't plan on it," Stephen said. "We have more grass than we have cattle, and that's a great problem to have."

Cattle behavior evolved as well. Their daily movement from one field made them easier to manage.

"As soon as we show up, they're lining up, ready for the new field," Jim said.

This shift in behavior simplifies tasks like headcounts and checking for health and pregnancies, significantly reducing workload.

Ecological benefits

When the pasture rests after intensive grazing, the grass flourishes, staying greener longer, even amidst drought.

“We weren’t all stressed this summer about the cattle and wondering where we’re going to get feed for them or if they’re going to make it through,” Stephen said.

“We were still trying to buy cattle through the summer because we had so much grass.”

As the native grasses fill in the barren land, Stephen sees signs of ecological restoration, such as more birds flying overhead. When Jim grew up around the land, he saw horned toads. For decades, they nearly disappeared. Now, they see them all around the property again.

Fly, typically terrible in the summer, were less prevalent because the cattle are moved and the dung beetle population came back, breaking up manure before the flies got a chance to swarm in. Then putting chickens in the pasture after the dung beetles, controls the fly larvae that might be deposited.

What excites them most, however, were when Jim grew up around the land, he saw horned toads daily. For decades, they nearly disappeared. Now, they see them all around the property again.

Selling carbon credits

About a year into their transformation, the Wests learned about the opportunity to sell carbon credits at a cattle raiser conference.

Although they were already practicing regenerative land management, the family was a little skeptical of what might be required of them.

“We kept saying, ‘What’s the catch?’ It just seemed too good to be true. We were making efforts to improve our land anyway, and this way, we could get paid for it,” Stephen said.

They developed a plan to use credit payments from Grassroots Carbon on land improvements for the first

Implementing generative practices

Before



After



four years, and use the larger payment that comes in Year 5 to expand their business.

“Working with Grassroots Carbon has given us a little extra capital to do the things we want to do, and help us to continue to improve our land,” Jim said.

Although the financial rewards help the bottom line, it’s the land improvements and growing openness to regenerative practices from ranchers who were once naysayers the Wests value most.

When they first implemented daily pasture movements, neighbors raised eyebrows, often asking others but never him directly.

Eventually, when their grass stayed green despite drought and his animals thrived, neighbors began asking them directly.

"We'd only been doing it this way for a little bit, we have had peoplesking 'Hey, what are you doing?' They can't ignore that we've got grass and they don't. That's been really cool," Stephen said.

Jim hopes that with their success, others will follow.

"I just want more people doing it. It makes a huge difference. It would change our microenvironment. I think we'd have fewer droughts," he said. "I think it would help all of us if we can get communities to start going down this road."

What happens with continuous grazing?



Overgrazing

Continuous grazing without pasture rest periods can lead cattle to eat certain vegetation faster than it can grow and not eating other vegetation we don't want. This can result in the degradation of the wanted plant species, loss of biodiversity, and decreased forage quality.



Soil compaction

Cattle hooves over long periods compact the soil, reduce its porosity and water infiltration capacity. This compaction can lead to increased surface runoff, soil erosion, and diminished water retention.



Changes in vegetation

Continuous grazing can alter the composition of plant species in an ecosystem. Cattle often preferentially graze certain plants, leading to a shift in the dominance of vegetation and potentially favoring the growth of less desirable species.



Loss of riparian vegetation

Uncontrolled grazing near water sources can result in the degradation of riparian vegetation. This, in turn, can contribute to soil erosion, reduced water quality, and habitat loss for aquatic species.



Nutrient cycling

Continuous grazing can impact nutrient cycling in the soil. The removal of vegetation by grazing can reduce organic matter input, affecting nutrient cycling processes and soil fertility.