

# Kankakee Sands

December 2007

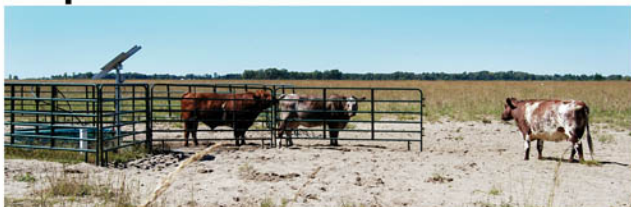
The Nature Conservancy 

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## What are cows doing on the prairie at Kankakee Sands?

Eating grass, as you might expect. These cows are working to build a more diverse prairie.

One of our original 300 acre prairie plantings has been over-run with tall prairie grasses. Switch grass, big blue stem, and especially Indian grass have been so successful, that they have pushed out the native wildflowers and most of the other smaller grasses. The mixture of seed we chose for the initial planting included too much tall grass seed and the frequent prescribed fires for that prairie has helped those grasses grow, spread, and thrive. In a native prairie, the tall grasses are scattered across the landscape, kept in check by the hundreds of other plant species competing for root space. In prairie restorations like ours, if given a head-start, tall grasses spread quickly and efficiently, soon shading out other plants, and out-competing them for valuable root space.



A solar-powered well pumps drinking water for the KSands cows.



Here's where the cows go to work!

In the western portions of the Midwest, in states like Nebraska, Oklahoma and Missouri, many grassland managers use grazing to control over-aggressive grasses. They have found that if managed correctly, cows, in tandem with fire, and in a proper stocking rate, can effectively control the spread of grasses. The technique they use is called "patch-burn grazing". Here is how it works.

First, the prairie is divided into 3-4 sections. One section is burned in the fall. The cows are released on the prairie to graze. Since the burned patch produces soft, green grass shoots, the cows prefer to graze that patch. In fact, the cows will remain on the burned patch, grazing the soft grass all season long,

setting the grasses back. When the animals are removed in the fall, wildflower seed is sown across the grazed area, which now has much less grass cover. A second section is then burned, and the cycle starts all over again. This cycle of burn-graze-overseed is repeated on one unit each year until the desired result (in this case a more diverse prairie) is achieved. An ag science teacher interested in sustainable farming practices and a nearby livestock farmer provide the cows.

One of the unintended benefits of patch-burn grazing is what it does for grassland birds. In addition to reducing grass cover and making new space for wildflowers, patch-burn grazing alters the structure of the prairie. The un-grazed tall grass prairie is good habitat for a subset of grassland birds, such as bobolinks and Henslow's sparrow. The grazed prairie has areas that are tall and areas that are shorter, which provides good habitat for a broader range of grassland birds. This "structural diversity" results in better bird diversity.



In mid-October, co-workers from Nature Conservancy chapters in Washington state and Michigan came to assess costs and the feasibility of developing native seed nurseries to expand or improve prairie remnants across larger landscapes. Purdue and University of Michigan students also toured the project to learn about conservation biology and restoration.

**Thanks** to our volunteers from INFO, IU and North Newton HS for helping with seed cleaning and collecting.

## Upcoming KSands 2008 Workday

Saturday, March 15th, 2008. 9 am – 12 pm Central

Surround yourself with green this St. Patrick's Day Weekend at the Kankakee Sands Greenhouse. We will be transplanting lucky seedlings from germination flats into small square pots. It can get quite warm in the greenhouse (90°), so bring lots of clothing options, from a jacket to a short-sleeved shirt. Sunglasses and a hat are also often useful. RSVP's much appreciated. Contact Alyssa Nyberg with your questions or RSVP: 219-285-2184 or anyberg@tnc.org.

KSands Visitors