



BeefTalk 728: Eucs, Grass and a Tear

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



Grass is not simply a plant that is potted and admired.

The other day, the Dickinson Research Extension Center became home to an unstoppable force that is going to drill a well. In this case, an oil well.

The spot selected is in the middle of a native grass pasture. Who knows the age of that native grass, but certainly the plants were there long before any of us. This mixture of grass plants and interesting earth cover certainly would bemoan its upcoming fate.

Not long after the fence was opened, the Eucs arrived. Perhaps I should not call them Eucs because the name is specific to the early earthmovers that were made by the



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Euclid Co. of Ohio as late as the 1950s.

Other companies make large, if not monstrous, earthmovers, but like those earthmovers that were used to build the Garrison Dam, the name Euc sticks. A Euc is a massive machine that is extremely efficient at moving dirt. As the Eucs parked in preparation of tomorrow's onslaught, Lee Manske and I went to the ranch to take one more look at the site.

Our feelings were mixed. Perhaps there was a bit of dismay and a bit of disgust, but we both knew there was no stopping the process. That was the essence of the trip: a time to acknowledge our feelings and saying goodbye to something we know will not be back in our lifetime. The ground we stood on would be green again, but the soil we stood on would need time, a long time, to re-establish the working ecosystem developed through the centuries.

We already had agreed to the process and understand the many issues involved between surface and subsurface property. The reservations were there, and so were the doubts about the bigger picture. There was a bit of reverence or the lack thereof as the land was about to be disturbed, which is something even the glaciers could not do.

This land had become a seemingly perpetual ecosystem of life. Grass is not simply a plant that is potted and admired. No, grass is the essence of life and the source of the prairie ecosystem. I asked Lee, who is the center's range scientist, just how old the plants were. He said the source of some of the plants could go back 100 years or more. Longevity of grass plants in grassland ecosystems is dependent on the development of tillers through the vegetative production from

axillary buds.

Although studies obviously do not go back hundreds of years, we do know grass plant longevity of major northern species managed with traditional grazing practices can approach 50 years. Grass plant longevity would be expected to be long. As the plant community expands, this process of passing on genes through vegetative growth determines the survivability of the grasslands.

This constantly developing ecosystem, which slowly evolves through the interaction of grazing animals and the need for plants to be grazed, is critical. Grazing stimulates vegetative tiller production, which assures the growth and development of native grasslands. This earthy cover, the prairie grasslands, when present, is home to a much more powerful life-giving system, which is the prairie ecosystem.

If for no other reason, Lee and I stood there to acknowledge that point. What is an ecosystem? Without one, it would be like having a house with no electricity, heat, cooling, furniture, beds or even a kitchen. Without an ecosystem, the world simply becomes a shell, a nonfunctioning nonlife supporting empty place. We might survive, but with the passing of time, that survival becomes doubtful because all inputs have to be obtained from somewhere else.

Lee went on to explain this ecosystem process and how, under our feet, living systems are driving biological, chemical and atmospheric pathways that actively are transferring essential elements into our ecosystem.

Ideally, the ecosystem is obtaining more than is being used, so there is a positive contribution to a growing and healthy world. The key to the system is not so much the above-ground grass, but the soil microorganisms that are supported by the below-ground grass roots and other living things.

Lee pointed out that, once disturbed, these organisms die and only can be replenished from an existing living ecosystem. The functional replenishment and growth of the soil biosphere takes years because living communities only expand outward at a rate of a few inches a year. That is why we knew that what we were standing on would not be back in our lifetime.

The Earth does take care of itself. Today, Lee and I paid our respect to something we know is marvelous and said goodbye to a piece that soon no longer will exist.

May you find all your ear tags.

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