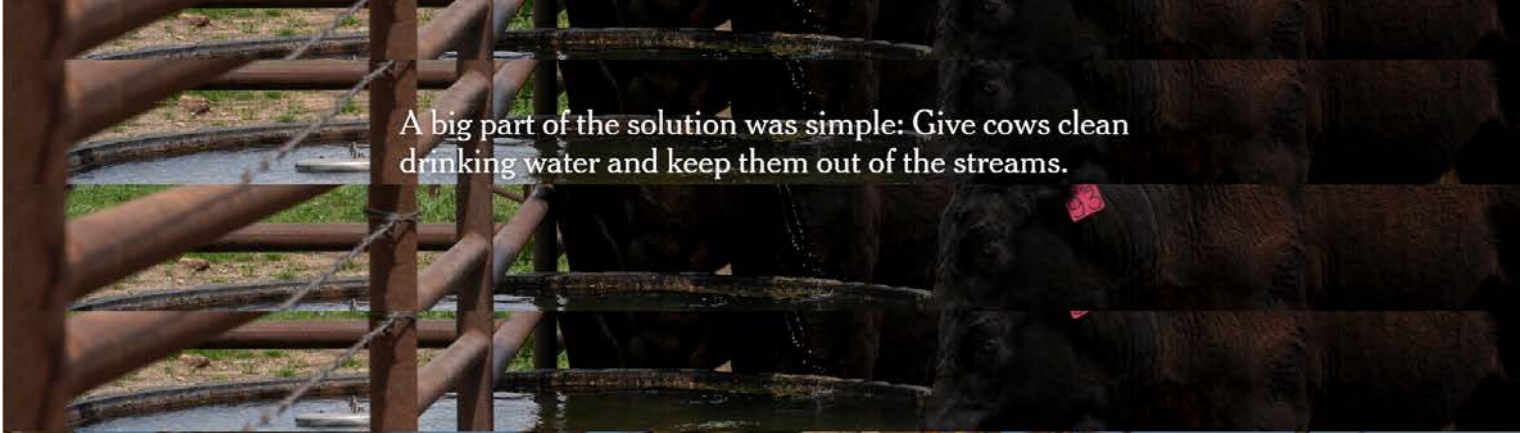


How a Water Conservation Idea Won Over Oklahoma Farmers

By [Cara Buckley](#) Visuals by Nick Oxford



A big part of the solution was simple: Give cows clean drinking water and keep them out of the streams.



When one farmer tried it, he quickly saw results. His veterinarian bills went down and wildlife returned to the area.

Grant Watson wasn't sure what to expect when he decided to fence

Grant Victor wasn't sure what to expect when he decided to fence his cattle off from Horse Creek, which winds through northeast Oklahoma, bisecting his family's pastures and cropland.

The original plot of land has been in his family since the 1890s, and they added to it over the years. But a century's worth of bovine traffic had left the creek's banks muddy and bare, and its waters thick with kicked-up sediment and animal waste.

In 2016, Mr. Victor resolved to change that. Working with a conservation program, he installed fencing around Horse Creek, creating a protective riparian buffer, even though it meant keeping his animals off 220 acres, about 6 percent of his family's land.

50 States, 50 Fixes is [a series about local solutions](#) to environmental problems. More to come this year.

Today, Horse Creek is no longer on the state's list of most contaminated waterways. And, thanks to practices such as the ones enacted by Mr. Victor, about 100 Oklahoman streams once polluted by runoff predominantly from farmland have been restored to health. That's more than in any other state, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.



Grant Victor along the banks of Horse Creek. "Mother Nature knows how to heal itself," he said.

For Mr. Victor, the decision to fence his cattle off from the waterway wasn't easy. The creek was why his great-grandmother, who was Cherokee, especially prized the land. The parcel was allotted to her in 1891 through the Dawes Act, which allowed the federal government to break up tribal land. The waterway gave the family's cattle a place where they could drink and cool off.

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"I'm sure at the coffee shop, they were all laughing at me," Mr. Victor, 68, said.

"But even though it's my land, it's not really my land. I'm just a person here with it at this time, and I carry that big responsibility."

— Grant Victor

The benefits of a healthier waterway exceeded his hopes. Mr. Victor thought that the land around the creek might regenerate in five years, perhaps 10. But within just a couple of years, the banks were transformed into verdant corridors of grasses and shrubs. Wildlife appeared, including white-tailed deer, bobcats, coyotes and bald eagles that return each year to a sprawling nest to rear their young.

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The health of his cows improved, too. Mr. Victor installed pipes and wells in the pastures, allowing his cattle to drink water unsullied by sediment and their own waste. They put on more weight and suffered fewer respiratory ailments, and that resulted in lower veterinary bills.

"The amazing thing that I have to keep telling people is, 'You can't believe how quickly it all changed,'" Mr. Victor said. "Mother Nature knows how to heal itself. It always has and always will, but you have to give it a chance."





An adult cruises the skies nearby.

The cleaner waters have drawn more wildlife.

Shanon Phillips, director of the Water Quality Division at the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, said the state had started using federal funds to track stream health in the late 1990s. Getting livestock and crop farmers to adopt conservation practices was key.

Steve Glasgow recently retired as a state resource conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Services, a division of the Agriculture Department. He said memories of the Dust Bowl prompted many Oklahoma farmers to adopt practices such as cover crops and no-till farming, which help to stem erosion and nutrient runoff. That benefits the health of soil and nearby waterways.

Mr. Glasgow estimates that nearly a third of Oklahoma's crop farmers employ conservation practices, up from roughly one-fifth 25 years ago.

"They know what happened to the generations before them, their dads and granddads," Mr. Glasgow said. "They're very much conservation-minded, wanting to keep soil in place and not let erosion take place."

Those conservation practices can also increase yields and reduce labor and fuel costs. While the Trump administration cut an

Agriculture Department program supporting cover crops and no-till farming, Ms. Phillips said there was still funding for those practices through the current farm bill.

Mr. Glasgow said that ranchers could be resistant to keeping cattle out of waterways. Regular flooding can wash out fences, and some question the effects of their livestock on distant watersheds. "It's just a hard sell," he said.

For Mr. Victor, one deciding factor was the water health of Grand Lake, a popular vacation spot that is part of the same watershed as Horse Creek. In 2011, James M. Inhofe, then a longtime Republican senator and climate science denialist, announced that he'd gotten ill after swimming in toxic algae at the lake. Mr. Victor was already using cover crops and no-till practices at the time.



Grant Victor's ranch in Afton, Okla.

"I decided I want to be a part of helping fix it," he said. A government program covered the bulk of the cost of the watering systems and fences, and Mr. Victor spent around \$250,000. Still, he said he had since largely recouped the investment. The new wells allowed for rotational grazing, leading to healthier grass and soil, and more cows in the fields, improving productivity. He also secured an agreement with the Grand River Dam Authority, Oklahoma's largest utility, to collect payments for 30 years for the conserved land.

Ms. Phillips said water quality at Grand Lake had improved, helped by major landowners who adopted conservation easements. "We haven't solved all the problems with Grand Lake, but it was a demonstration that we could have meaningful water quality improvement with those voluntary programs," she said.

Mr. Victor, who was nominated in 2023 to serve on the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, said many of his fellow farmers remained skeptical about conservation practices.

But, he said, “my dad always taught me there’s some things you can’t afford to do and there’s other things you can’t afford not to do.”

“This was one of the things I couldn’t afford not to do,” he added