All Trees & No Cattle

Native trees are taking over your productive rangeland—and every year you wait, it costs more to fix. Without natural fires that controlled them for millennia, trees are rapidly converting grasslands into woodlands. Trees have already cost western rangelands $5 billion in forage since 1990.

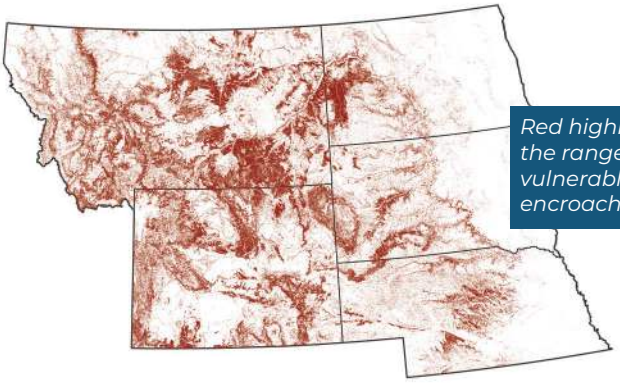
Producers in the Northern Great Plains still have time to act. Unlike parts of the Southern Great Plains where restoration can cost northward of $2,000+ per acre, our region remains in early-stage encroachment where prevention works and costs stay low.

But the window is closing fast. Trees mature in 10-20 years and multiply quickly. Prevention at <$50/acre today becomes $800 in a decade, $3,000 in two decades. Meanwhile, you're losing 30-75% of forage in affected areas.

The solution is straightforward: Act while it's still affordable.

- Remove young trees before they produce seeds
- Monitor your lands regularly to identify new establishment
- Invest in prevention now—save thousands per acre later
- Use prescribed fire where available to manage the seedbank

Protecting your ranch's productivity for future generations starts with action today. By maintaining healthy, open rangeland through proactive management, you're preserving the same productive landscape your grandparents stewarded—ensuring your grandchildren inherit the thriving operation that has sustained your family for generations.



Red highlights the rangelands vulnerable to conifer encroachment

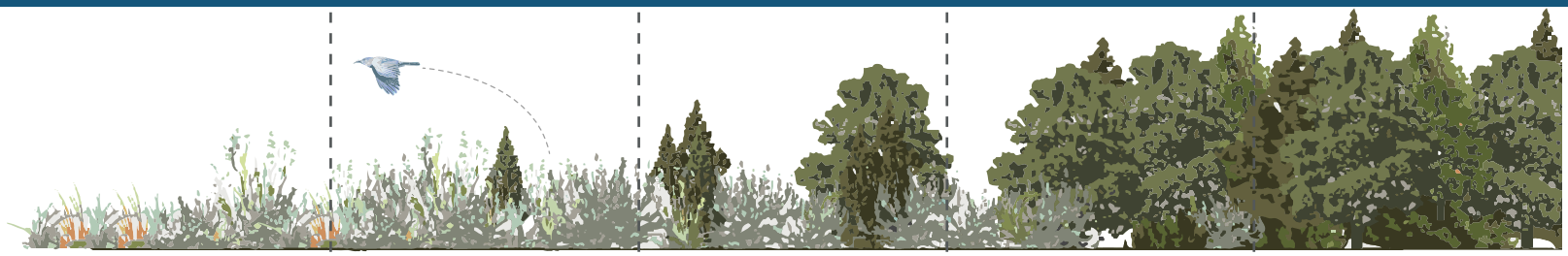
WHAT WE ARE LOSING EVERY YEAR

In The Northern Great Plains

>455,000 tons of forage production

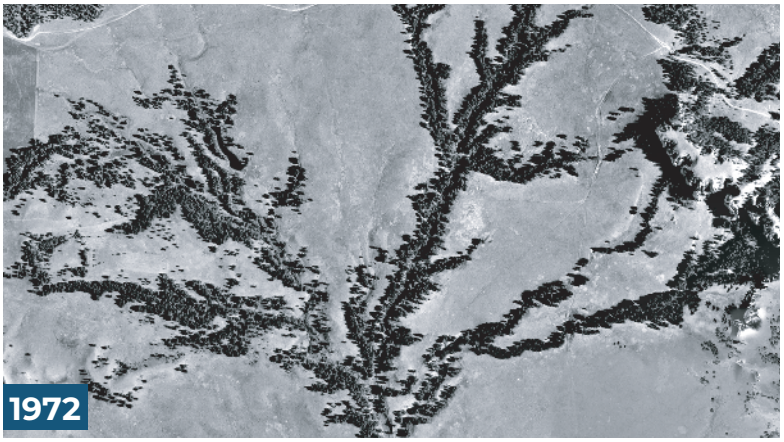
Enough to feed **96,000 cow-calf pairs**

Worth approximately **$195 million** at auction



WHAT YOU SEE				
Intact rangeland	Intact rangeland with conifer seeds present	Scattered seedlings	Scattered mature trees (producing seed)	Woodland
FORAGE LOSS				
0%	0%	Up to 10%	30%	Up to 75%
COST/ACRE TO FIX				
Early Action: <$50	Prevention: <$50	$100-200	$500-800	$800-$3,000+

What's Happening on One Montana Ranch

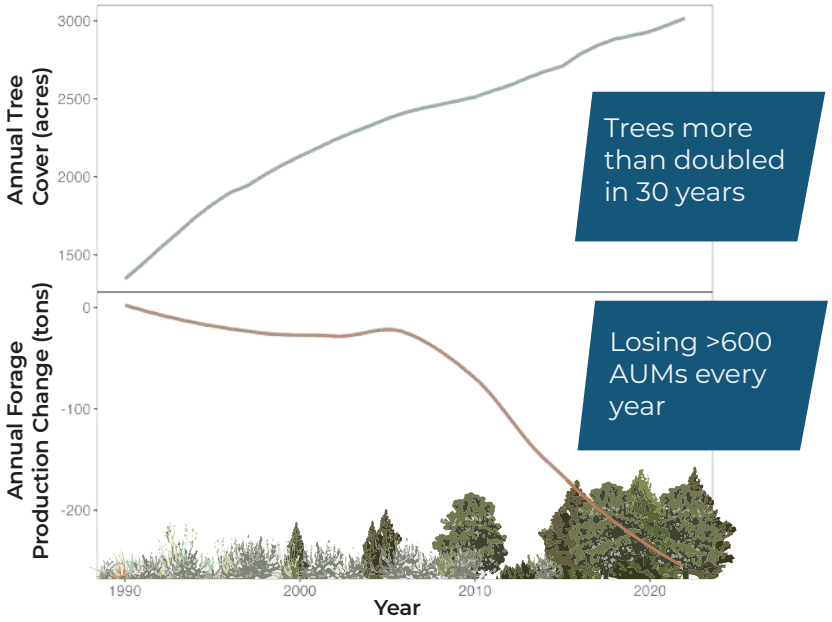


This 11,500-acre Montana ranch shows what's at stake across our region. Fifty years ago, this family operation was almost entirely open rangeland. Today, trees have taken over **1,700 acres—15% of the ranch—and they're advancing on another 3,700 acres right now.**

The real kicker? It happened faster than anyone expected. Areas that were completely open in 1990 are now thick with trees. In just 30 years, a few scattered seedlings became a major economic problem. Without intervention, less than half the open grazing lands will remain by 2052, leaving the next generation with a ranch that grows trees, not cows.

Here's what waiting cost this ranch: Treating emerging trees in 1992—when it would have cost around $342,000—could have prevented most of today's forage losses. Better yet, spreading that investment over 10-20 years as part of routine management would have lowered costs while keeping encroachment in check. Now, getting back to 1990 conditions would cost over $1 million and they've already lost 30 years of production on those acres. At this rate, treatment costs will exceed $4 million by 2052.

The lesson is clear: Catch encroachment early or pay exponentially more later. Cost-share programs like NRCS EQIP can help offset expenses—but each dollar stretches further when the work starts early.



Year	Total Treatment Cost	Acres Treated	Cumulative Forage Loss (AUMs)*
1992	$342,200	1,132	13
2002	$716,900	1,828	635
2012	$1,019,800	2,177	1,676
2022	$1,601,800	2,614	7,089
2052	$4,180,500	6,305	74,509

** AUMs Calculated Using 790lbs of forage per 1 AUM*

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

For more information about conifer encroachment and proactive management solutions, visit www.ConiferEncroachment.com