



# featured

## LAND BLOSSOMS UNDER DIRECTION OF

### *Improving land is the work of a lifetime for Oedekovens*

By Jennifer Thompson

One of the first things noticed about Jason Oedekoven is his distinct attitude of gratitude.

He is deeply grateful for many things – with his family and their land heading the list. The changes this family has made to the land around their house have transformed a flooded, trash-filled eyesore to a place where grass grows once again, the creek flows clear, cattle live in more comfort, and pollinators and other wildlife find shelter and food.

Jason's family has been in the northeastern corner of the state near Recluse for many years. His great-grandfather homesteaded (around 1911) after working for a cattle company in the area. As an adult, Jason leased land around the area from his family and hayed for the neighbors. His wife, Maureen, is the fourth generation of their family to run the Recluse post office.

#### **Troubling Property Assessment**

The Oedekovens purchased their property about 15 years ago. There hadn't been many takers – the place had some pretty big issues.

"Our creek was devastated here," says Jason.

The field near the house was underwater because a culvert had collapsed and backed up the creek. The ground around it was white as the stagnant water brought the salts/alkali to the soil surface, which was bare of any vegetation. The septic tank was draining into the area, too. Car bodies and tons of garbage had been dumped over the years. Corrals were deep with manure because the property had been run as a 1,000-head feedlot for some time. Invasive weeds infested the riparian area. It was common to lose newborn calves each year to drowning when they

slipped down the eroded creek bank into the water.

The Oedekovens looked around and set to work.

To get the creek flowing again, they hauled tons of garbage to the scrapyard for recycling or to the local landfill, and fixed the culvert. To restore the area, they provided more wildlife habitat and improved the creek water quality by fencing cattle out of the creek with a fence containing one water gap. They put in a livestock water pipeline, a solar-powered livestock tank (with wildlife escape ramps) that can be accessed from three of his pastures, and a fabricated metal windbreak away from the creek.

The water from the tank and shelter provided by the windbreak draw cattle away from the riparian area. They hauled over a hundred loads of manure out of the corrals and spread it on the fields using a dump truck and disked it into the soil.

The corral fencing was all down so they rebuilt it, and they repaired the buildings.

Several areas around the property were overrun with invasive weeds, including many which choked the creek area – they began a campaign to get them under control. The area



*A fence borders the pollinator area.*

# landowners

## NORTHEASTERN WYOMING FAMILY



*The Oedekovens have revitalized land once choked by weeds, garbage, excess manure, and a riparian area made barren by salts.*

included a lot of Canada thistle, which Jason has controlled with Milestone herbicide.

The flooded field near the house stunk for three years due to all the garbage and debris that had rotted on it. It took the same amount of time for the grass to start growing back after they got the creek flowing again.

### **Rejuvenated Ranch**

Jason is amazed at the number of plants that have come back. Grasses that now cover the creek banks help slow the water in the spring so sediment is able to drop out, leaving the water cleaner.

"It has made a huge difference in the land ... You wouldn't believe the

birds that nest in here," he says.

The creek will flow year-round in a good precipitation year (maintaining a trickle). He says the cleanup effort has benefited the ducks, pheasants, and a wide range of other wildlife.

He says his whole perspective has changed through the family's desire to get things back to the way they believed they should have been. The family's effort has been monumental with everyone – Jason, Maureen, their son Bryton, and daughter Brandi – pitching in.

"I couldn't have done it without my wife and kids beside me," says Jason.

Along with tremendous amounts of labor, the Oedekovens have

invested quite a bit of money in all the improvements, but many of the projects wouldn't have been possible without cost-share assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"I couldn't have done all these things without it," he says, "and I wouldn't have known about the programs without being educated."

He has worked closely with Tim Kellogg, the local NRCS district conservationist, on riparian area fencing, solar livestock tank, fabricated wind-break, livestock water pipelines, and on a pollinator planting.

"It's been a wonderful experience, and he's helped us a bunch."

Jason was aware of the declines

that were happening with honey bees and wanted to help them. His great-grandfather and grandfather had honey bees, but there hadn't been bees in their area for years. He believed it would be a good idea to get bees back.

He heard about the pollinator planting projects at a Campbell County Conservation District meeting. Jason says the NRCS program was easy to be a part of. It took a fair amount of effort at the front but was fairly easy after that.

### Pollinator Preparation

Weed control and ground preparation are very important in pollinator plantings. Jason took the time needed to kill the Canadian thistle and many other weeds. The area also had crested wheat and alfalfa. When the ground looked right and the weeds seemed under control, they planted with an old John Deere disk drill, since that is what they had on hand.

Kellogg was really helpful in picking out the type of seed. They planted in the spring since they often receive quite a bit of precipitation then. They received some great moisture that year.

Maintenance has been mostly weed control through a combination of spraying, mowing and releasing biocontrol insects for the Canadian thistle. The plant community within



*A fabricated windbreak and livestock tank (behind the shelter) draws cattle away from a riparian area.*

the pollinator planting has changed over the last seven years. There were mainly wildflowers the first couple years, then the grasses started filling in. The grasses have provided more cover and resources (nesting areas, etc.) for the wildlife.

Jason says anyone planting pollinator plots should be patient; it doesn't happen overnight, but it's a great thing to be part of.

"We're real grateful for the way it has all turned out. I believe it just takes a lot of hard work and effort

from both sides, people working together," he says.

Now honey bee hives are back in the area. The Oedekovens work with a local beekeeper who brought the hives out and tends them. The last few years of honey

production, with the good moisture, have been exceptional. The owner of the hives told Jason he got the most honey ever off of their place. There have been fewer flowers for the bees with the drought this year. Jason hopes next year will be better.

Neighbors have watched all the improvement projects with great curiosity. After seeing them in action, some of his neighbors have adopted these types of projects for their own land (fencing riparian areas, installing windbreaks).

But the Oedekovens are not done yet! They are working on a timber thinning project with the Campbell County Conservation District to improve tree health and reduce wildfire danger. Working together, the Oedekovens have transformed this piece of property back into the beautiful, life-sustaining place it was meant to be.

Visit <http://bit.ly/oedekoven> to learn



more about the Oedekoven's efforts on our video clips

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