OUTLOOK

Beef prices are soaring. Regenerative grazing is helping Texas ranchers cash in | Opinion

Texas beef prices are soaring as herds shrink. Regenerative grazing allows ranchers to drought-proof their land and produce high-quality cattle.

Video: Houston Chronicle

By Nick Powell , *Staff Writer*

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In the midst of a hellish drought, the Sneary Cattle Ranch looks like Eden.

I'm sitting on a bale of hay on a tractor trailer with a group of ranchers rumbling across the 4,000-acre ranch on a muggy autumn afternoon about 50 milessouthwest of Hous-

ton in Matagorda County. There's only been a few inches of rain in the area the past several months, but you'd never know it from the verdant surroundings. We're all marveling at the flourishing shrubs, and dew-kissed blades of grass.

Sneary ranch in Matagorda County hosted a field day to persuade fellow ranchers to try high-stock density grazing. Rancher Loy Sneary and his son Adam Sneary converted their 4,000 acres of ranch land in Matagorda County southeast of Houston to a regenerative ranching operation 10 years ago.

Sharon Steinmann/Houston Chronicle

This lushness, this exuberant fecundity, is the byproduct of regenerative ranching, which Loy Sneary and his son, Adam, have been practicing for the past 10 years. The hay ride is part of a field day they're hosting to persuade fellow ranchers to try high-stock density grazing.

Their pitch is well-timed. Cattle ranching generates billions for Texas' economy, even as cattle herds are thinning due in part to drought. That low supply, combined with our insatiable appetite for red meat, has contributed to record-high prices for American ground beef: $6.75 per pound on average, up 22% from last year. That's lousy news for H-E-B grocery shoppers and tourists who will be shelling out for Texas Sized Burgers at the Houston Rodeo this month.

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But ranchers stand to make a windfall. Cattlemen are making profits of up to $700 per animal. There's never been more incentive for ranchers to figure out how to produce the hefty, healthy and, crucially, pregnant cows we saw grazing on the Snearys' ranch. The Snearys also work with Grassroots Carbon, a land management business, which sponsored the field day to potentially attract new clients. The company, based in San Antonio, pays regenerative ranchers for their labor, which sequesters carbon in the soil, generating carbon credits for major corporate buyers such as Microsoft, Nestle and Chevron. Over the last 12 months alone, they've distributed more than $15 million in proceeds back to ranchers.

"Anybody in the ranching business really needs to consider this type of grazing management, because it'll add to your bottom line," Loy told me.

Three years ago, my colleague spent a day with Loy and Adam on their ranch and came away moved by their dedication to being conscientious stewards of their land. That they profit from regenerative ranching is a bonus.

It's also an ideal antidote to the volatility of ranching. Ranchers are tinkerers by nature. They have to be in a fickle business where the costs of feed and labor can eat into profits. Not to mention unpredictable weather patterns, especially in a statewhere rainfall extremes are feast or famine for crops and natural disasters, from hurricanes to wildfires, are a seasonal threat.

The Snearys' teeming, drought-proof land is a testament to the durability of regenerative ranching. They are evangelists for this centuries-old practice, which harkens back to the natural migratory grazing patterns of bison. It's not lost on me that the field day is a business proposition at its core — the Grassroots Carbon hats and pamphlets scattered on tables in the welcome tent aren't exactly subtle.

But the sales pitch is tinged with a noble idealism. This is the way ranching should be done — laboring to nurture a harmonious relationship between humans, animals and the natural environment.

Rotations, Roots, Resilience

Rancher Loy Sneary and his son Adam Sneary converted their 4,000 acres of ranch land in Matagorda County southeast of Houston to a regenerative ranching operation 10 years ago. The practice known as "adaptive high-stock density grazing" involves rotating the cattle, often daily, into much smaller areas to prevent overgrazing.
Sharon Steinmann

Using portable electric fencing, the Snearys move their cattle herds from one relatively small paddock of grass to another every few days, with the help of an app called PastureMap that helps them strategize where to graze. The cattle munch on the top layers of grass and weeds, trampling, pooping and peeing on it to fertilize it naturally. The rancher's job is to not let them overgraze and chew the grass down to the root. As the grazed paddocks recover, over time the land's biology slowly gets re-wired. Soil that was once dry, plated and compacted softens into a looser clump, rich with biodiversity and aggregation, a carbon sink able to retain twice as much rainfall as conventional ranch land.

That contrast was put in stark relief on our hay ride. We stopped at the Snearys' fenceline, which abuts a neighboring ranch. I high-stepped through waist-high brush and grass to the fence to get a closer look. The neighbors' land was flat, dry and dusty with grass grazed nearly to the root.

On the Sneary side of the fence, we crowded around Dr. Allen Williams, a pioneer in regenerative agriculture, for a demonstration. He stuck his shovel in the ground. The soil on this section of the Snearys' ranch started off as heavy clay, he tells us. In thethroes of a drought, that usually means it's rock hard. But Williams barely had to push to get his shovel in the ground, easily pulling up a clump of roots in dark, moist dirt.

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"The way Adam's been managing this, see all these aggregates here?" Williams said, pointing to the clumps of soil particles held together by natural sugary adhesives that are crucial to letting water infiltrate. "We've got tons of floor space, we've got tons of fibrous roots. Even in spite of this being heavy clay in a drought in high heat, we're still seeing a highly functional soil. That's exactly what we want to see."

The nutrient-rich grass this soil produces is a far better diet for the cows than storebought feed. Even the pejorative "weeds" — such as crabgrass, thistle or horsenettle — are full of crude protein and more digestible nutrients than most grass types. Healthier cows are more likely to produce calves. More calves — particularly in this favorable market — means more money.

"We just pregnancy checked our cows about two weeks ago, we have over a 98% pregnancy rate, and that's because of the nutrition they're getting," Loy said. "We're not giving them any extra supplements. This is what cows were designed to eat."

I'm an easy convert. It's easy to get swept up in the idealism of this holistic approach when you're a city slicker reveling in a vast, biodiverse pasture. I don't have thousands of acres of land to manage and a dwindling herd of cattle. Even if most of the ranchers here want to be conscientious stewards of their land, they want numbers that back up the sentiment.

Before our hay ride, Williams showed our group a series of slides with data from more than 120 ranches that took up regenerative grazing. In the first year, these ranches had an additional two inches of aggregate soil depth — the type of porous soil structure essential for water infiltration and root growth. By year three, it was at 6.2 inches. Then the exponential leap in year four — almost 15 inches of healthy soil depth, more than enough to sustain a ranch through a prolonged dry spell.

“If we can capture an additional two inches of rainfall per acre, for every 1,000 acres, that's an additional 54 million gallons of water that you're storing in your soil,” Williams said.

It’s convincing, but a lot can happen in four years to deter ranchers. Will skeptics be willing to shift without an immediate payoff?

Drought Tests Belief

“Adaptive high-stock density grazing” involves rotating the cattle, often daily, into much smaller areas to prevent overgrazing. Cows are pictured with their newborn calves on Sneary Ranch on October 23, 2025.
Sharon Steinmann/Houston Chronicle

David Foose, a Fort Worth-area rancher who went regenerative in 2021, acknowledged that his first couple of years were bumpy. He said he's in a better position today than he would be if he was doing conventional ranching, but a drought in 2023 tested his patience. He spent extra money on hay to keep his cows well-fed, a gamble that paid off when the rain patterns eventually normalized and water finally trickled into his soil.

"Right now I'm not feeding (the cattle) any hay," Foose said. "With quick rotation, the grass generally bounces back pretty quick. It's been dry lately, but I've still been able to keep them going on the grass that I have. I am in a way better position than if I was doing conventional ranching."

On the hay ride on our way back from the fenceline demonstration, I chatted with Fred Sanchez. He grew up ranching in a more conventional style in Webb County, where arid conditions don't necessarily give ranchers the luxury of time to experiment with newfangled methods. He's helped manage the Snearys' ranch for years, and has seen firsthand how the land has transformed. Yet he sympathizes with ranchers who are hesitant to cast aside tradition.

"Ranching is a very personal thing here," Sanchez told me. "Their whole soul is in it. So when someone comes over to you and says 'You've been doing it wrong,' it's very challenging. It's gonna be incremental. You don't ever get somebody and just baptize them in this way of life because that ain't gonna work."

Sneary ranch in Matagorda County hosted a field day to persuade fellow ranchers to try high-stock density grazing. Rancher Loy Sneary and his son Adam Sneary converted their 4,000 acres of ranch land in Matagorda County south-east of Houston to a regenerative ranching operation 10 years ago.

Sharon Steinmann/Houston Chronicle

As a researcher, Williams brings a necessary global perspective. He's traveled all over the world championing regenerative agriculture, and has seen the practice thrive in all sorts of environments. He's able to persuade ranchers by emphasizing that adaptive grazing isn't prescriptive.

In the Chihuahua desert in Mexico, for instance — a drier climate similar to where Sanchez grew up in South Texas — he's helped ranchers go from needing 200 acres to support a cow down to 40 acres. It's the same exponential progress that we see at Loy and Adam's ranch, but in a different context.

“It's all relative to your situation,” Williams said. “And to me, it's even more meaningful because we're literally transitioning an arid environment into a green environment.”

Regardless of the ecosystem, Williams is hopeful that the high beef prices will attract more ranchers to regenerative grazing. I wonder, though, if the favorable market might have the inverse effect, providing the financial security for ranchers to continue with their conventional practices.

Loy Sneary has been ranching long enough to know we’re at the apex of a boom cycle. Beef prices won’t stay this high forever. Still, he’s optimistic that regenerative agriculture will become mainstream as investors catch on to a method that produces more high-quality beef with lower input costs. When I checked back in with Loy last week, months after visiting his ranch, he told me he still is fielding interest from his ranching colleagues.

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“We just got a request yesterday from one of the ranchers wanting to know what kind of poly wire, electric wire we use, he’s looking into changing his grazing management, at least on part of his ranch,” Loy said.

The recent $200 million investment from McDonald’s to scale up regenerative ranching across the nation seems like a bellwether of its burgeoning popularity. Even the Trump administration is attempting to rebrand regenerative agriculture as a pillar of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s “Make America Healthy Again” agenda. The U.S. Department of Agriculture in December announced a $700 million regenerative agriculture pilot program to "strengthen America’s food and fiber supply.”

Admittedly, some of my romanticism about regenerative ranching dissipates when I think too hard about these strange political and corporate bedfellows converging behind it. But if these investments lead to fewer feedlots and factory farms and help sustain small family farmers and ranchers, that’s a trade off I’m more than comfortable with. As long as we’re continuing to eat prodigious amounts of beef, it should be produced with minimal environmental impact, and primarily benefit the ranchers — the original conservationists.

“A lot of us, and maybe even most of us, want to do what is the most environmentally responsible thing that we can do, whether it's crops or livestock that we're raising,” Loy said. “That’s pretty pervasive throughout all of agriculture.”

Nick Powell is an editorial writer and columnist for the Houston Chronicle.

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Nick Powell is an editorial writer for the Houston Chronicle.

Nick previously worked as the Chronicle's Gulf Coast reporter, leading the way on stories as varied as the Santa Fe High School shooting, the global race for a COVID-19 vaccine and Galveston’s long delay in rebuilding public housing after Hurricane Ike. Before joining the Chronicle, Nick worked as an opinion writer and editor at City & State NY.