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Garrett Virtue, left, who manages the bison herd, talks with property owner Loren Henry about the potential benefits of the animals.

BISON

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Loren said he hoped to make the land both productive and healthy, and his initial plan was to lease the parcel for seasonal cattle grazing.

A rancher pastured longhorn cattle on the property for a while, but Loren said he wasn't satisfied with the condition of the land.

The ground was choked with cheatgrass, whitetop and other invasive weeds.

"I had to spray weeds and mow, and it seemed like I was fighting nature," he said.

David then proposed to raise a different sort of livestock — bison.

After researching how the beasts can benefit grasslands, Loren decided to lease the property to his son for the new venture.

"I have no background in farming and ranching," said Loren, whose parents, Byron and Becky Henry, live just west of the property. "It's a long way from garbage and sewage handling."

Loren said he perused research showing that properly managed

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— Loren Henry, who owns the property where his son David's bison herd is grazing at the base of the foothills just west of Baker City

bison can keep weeds at bay, and encourage the growth of nutritious grasses, by trampling the ground (but not too much) and adding fertilizer to the soil so it requires less water to grow grass.

That's an important consideration for his property, which has limited water from a spring and a well.

"The long-term goal is to improve the quality of the grassland and make it productive and profitable," Loren said.

Part of that profit would come from the sale — including to local restaurants and other customers — of the lean, protein-packed bison meat.

"I think it looks promising that this is the best way to handle this property long-term," Loren said.

It's Virtue's task to make that prediction prove prophetic.

And although his experience

with livestock is mainly limited to cattle, he's enthusiastic about working with bison.

One advantage to bison, Virtue said, is that they retain much of the instinctive behavior that domesticated livestock have gradually lost.

Among their other traits, bison stay in herds, which makes it easier to control their impact on a particular patch of land. Bison also are more adept at finding food, Virtue said — they'll browse sagebrush and juniper, for instance.

He's not using herbicides on the property.

"We're letting the animals do what needs to be done," Loren said.

Virtue said the basis for the operation — the foundation, you might say — is soil.

Fighting weeds, he said, is akin to a doctor treating the symptoms of a disease rather than its root



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Although the bison have been on the Henry property only since December 2019, they've already started ripping up sagebrush. Landowner Loren Henry said he's excited to see grasses replacing sagebrush on parts of the 300-acre parcel. Bison tear out sagebrush when they rub against the shrubs, and they'll also eat the plant.

cause.

Grasses and other desirable vegetation is more likely to thrive if the soil below has the proper balance of bacteria and fungi, Virtue said.

"There's a lot going on under there, and you fix the problem by making the soil healthier," he said.

Bison and other livestock can contribute to soil health if they're moved around pastures at certain intervals, he said.

That means they stay in one area long enough that their hooves disturb the ground, allowing water and nutrients to more easily reach the roots, but not so long that they pound the soil into a hard pack that suppresses grass and encour-

ages weeds.

"We need to make sure the bison are where they need to be," Virtue said.

Bison also encourage grass growth by munching the stuff (much as your lawn grows rapidly after you mow it), and their feces and urine serve as free, and chemical-free, fertilizer.

Virtue said the Henry property has great potential to be a productive and healthy grassland.

"It's in a degraded state now, but these grasses all developed with grazing animals and periods of rest," he said. "We need to feed that soil."