

Restoring the land

Ranch near Kyle joins a growing trend in land conservation

By Miguel Liscano AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF Tuesday, January 4, 2005

Along a rocky trail at her ranch near Kyle, Julie Johnson whips out a jeweler's loupe and picks a blade of Indian grass to show off the tiny seeds at the tip of the plant's stem. Placing the loupe to her eye and the blade of grass under the magnifying lens, Johnson examines the plant as if appraising a diamond. "When you look at it real close like that, it just seems like some kind of miracle to see all the little seed heads right in there," she says. "If you just glance at it, it doesn't look like that big a deal, but that's an opportunity for 100 more plants to spring up from that one stem." She's standing in a patch of grass, which grows as high as 7 feet on some parts of the ranch. Just five years ago, dirt and rocks dominated the landscape -- the result of years of cattle overgrazing. Johnson and her husband, Gordon, bought the 100-acre ranch in the late 1990s and immediately began a painstaking process to restore the land to its natural state. Just about a mile away, the latest subdivision has sprung up, bringing with it increased pressure to sell the land to developers. But the Johnsons would rather turn back the clock on their property. "It's not uncommon to see some effort made to restore some of the natural vegetation, but they've done more work than anyone I've run into yet," says Todd Votteler, executive director of the Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust, a nonprofit land conservation organization. A couple of years back, the Johnsons received an offer of \$15,000 an acre from KB Home to sell their land for development. They declined. "Even though right now where we're standing is very undeveloped, it doesn't take very long for developers to come in," Gordon Johnson says. "People have got to have a place to live. But the thought of having it turned into a development, we just couldn't take." To hear Gordon Johnson tell it, restoring the ranch land to its native beauty took a few cedar tree clearings here, a few seeds thrown there and nature taking its course. But the project has cost up to \$17,000 a year, Gordon Johnson says, not counting the physical strain of building weirs -- piles of rock preventing water runoff -- and reseeding native grasses to control erosion. Gordon Johnson sometimes picks up his chainsaw and just starts walking, looking for pesky cedar to chop down. Julie Johnson routinely ventures out on the property and removes prickly pear cactus with a pick-ax. And she's built dams on certain areas of the ranch in hopes of preventing heavy water runoff. "Some people would maybe like to go the mall and go shopping, or maybe go out to lunch with girlfriends," she says. "This is so satisfying to me." The Johnsons are not environmentalists -- Gordon Johnson is a lobbyist, and Julie Johnson is a former personal trainer. They are quick to point out that they are not opposed to development, nor are they the first people to attempt to restore damaged property. The Johnsons say they just wanted a simpler life. Gordon Johnson grew up on a ranch northwest of Austin, and Julie Johnson spent summers as a child on a ranch near their current home. To ensure that the property remains unspoiled, the Johnsons handed over development rights, through a conservation easement, to the Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust. The arrangement qualifies the Johnsons for tax breaks and gives the River Trust control over how much the land can be developed. "If you drive out there, you'll see just how much development is right near this place," says Votteler, the River Trust director. "That kind of land does see rapid increases in value, and there's a substantial

financial incentive for people to stop ranching and to sell their property." The trust, launched in 2001 and funded by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, has entered into three conservation easement deals with landowners covering 300 acres in its 12-county area of operation. The Johnsons are part of a growing trend: landowners looking to ensure the natural beauty of their property through conservation easements. Across the state, the use of these easements by nonprofit land trust groups has more than doubled since 1999, jumping from 121,120 acres to 281,080 acres in 2003, according to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. That's not counting land acquired by municipalities to ensure that it remains pristine, such as more than 4,000 acres purchased by the City of Austin during the last four years to preserve the Edwards Aquifer. "The wide-open spaces and those things that we think are so 'Texas' -- big open spaces and mountain vistas and fresh clear running streams -- I think we can't take for granted any longer," says Carolyn Vogel, coordinator of the Texas Land Trust Council at the Parks and Wildlife Department. "People are concerned, and I think they also realize now they have tools -- some ways to sort of help." As the Johnsons restore their land, Votteler says, the native grasses will filter rainfall and road runoff before it reaches the Blanco River. Now, hilltops once covered with water-guzzling cedar trees have turned into pastures of bluestem and Indian grass growing through patches of rock where the owners originally doubted anything could sprout. "You would never know that grass would be able to grow here," Julie Johnson says, standing among the rocks as grass reaches up past her waist. "It looks like a parking lot one year, just nothing but rocks, and then you see the land trying to make a recovery."