Our beef cattle herd from the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture went to greener pastures this summer, from the campus here in Curtis to graze 840 acres on a ranch north of Oshkosh, Nebraska.

The NCTA animal science program includes a small beef herd with spring-born calves which traditionally grazes near campus.

When pasture resources became limited in recent years due to drought and dual grazing needs for our cattle and horse programs, the teaching and student herd opportunities were challenged. In stepped a new industry partner focused on conservation and education.

The Graves Ranch in Garden County is owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). When TNC heard about our 100 Cow Ownership Advantage Program and needs for the student herd, Jim Luchsinger (field director then based at Valentine), started problem-solving.

A resulting agreement between NCTA and TNC provides access to Graves Ranch resources with NCTA students sharing in “sweat equity” for facilities improvements and grazing management of the Sandhills vegetation including a federally-listed endangered plant species, blowout penstemon.

NCTA students and instructors have access to a wonderful, educational resource. A grant secured by TNC from the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project will help in improving range management with fencing supplies and equipment, while NCTA students apply technical skills and labor.

Additionally, a second partnership came about with the neighbors at the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, a unit of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Graves Ranch is four hours from our campus. NCTA workers are allowed to stay at Refuge bunk houses, and use cattle load-out facilities, plus access across the Refuge pastures to reach the Graves Ranch. Thank you to these new partners at TNC and USFWS.

After AI season was completed in May, we trucked the herd to Garden County and unloaded at the Refuge. NCTA faculty, staff and students trailed cattle across part of the Refuge to their summertime pasture. Today, with abundant rainfall and improved resources, the herd is flourishing.

This new venture helps us with the grazing “classroom” and more importantly to expand our student herd for the new Heifer Link program. Cattle donations and sponsorship to Heifer Link enable eligible students to manage cattle during their NCTA career, then to leave campus with a bred heifer they own.
A special thanks to our NCTA staff of Doug Smith, animal science division chairman; Roy Cole, NCTA farm manager; and Bridger Chytka, range and animal science instructor, for coordinating this new learning opportunity for our livestock students.

They will continue to oversee the students and herd, with cattle returning to campus after classes resume in late August, weaning of the calves, and planning for the next season in 2016.

What an innovative and exciting partnership with The Nature Conservancy! I look forward to sharing updates in the coming months.

If you’re interested in learning more about NCTA’s livestock programs, give us a call at 1-800-3-CURTIS.