It wasn’t the phone call Gary Price expected.

As a commercial rancher who tends to cattle outside of Blooming Grove, it should have been a friend, an order buyer or sales rep on the other end of the phone. Instead it was McDonald’s, asking to recognize him as a Flagship Farmer, the first U.S. beef producer to be inducted into the program.

Focused on spreading the message of good stewardship on a global stage, the Flagship Farmer program works to connect farmers and ranchers to share best practices with each other and positive stories with consumers.

Price said yes, unsure what the new partnership might hold. After working with McDonald’s for about a year, he says it’s dispelled any of his preconceived notions about the brand.

The food industry giant and humble rancher share similar values and a long, forward-thinking vision of sustainable food production. It’s not just about hamburgers or cattle, but all the details and complexities that go into building a sustainable supply chain that works for everyone.

“It’s been really good to be able to see the other side of the fence,” says Price. “To see the sincerity on their part is really rewarding, because we’re all in this together. We need them to be successful and they need us to be successful.”

Price is no stranger to sustainability. His 77 Ranch was honored with the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association National Environmental Stewardship Award in 2012. To him, wife Sue and son Gary Lee, taking care of the land is just their business, the day in and day out they have diligently done for more than 40 years.

In 1976, Price sold a horse to make the down payment on the 77 Ranch. A family friend was transitioning out of the business, allowing Sue and Gary to begin their journey. In the last four decades, they’ve pieced together parcels of land to total the 2,600 acres of Blackland Prairie that their crossbred herd of Angus, Hereford and Brahman genetics now roam.
Called the most threatened ecosystem in North America, the land has been Price’s teacher and passion project. Instead of a terrain to conquer, it’s a history book to be read — telling him the story of how rangeland has evolved and what it desires in a steward. Most of his pasture was once a cotton field, now renovated to native grass; but the section of prairie that’s never seen a plow demonstrates the resiliency and benefits of what the land alone can do.

**PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE**

“In the drought of 2011, we had 150-year-old pecan trees dying, but the native grasses found a way to survive,” he says.

It’s taught him to look at the land like a bank account, never taking more than he’s put in.

“It takes grass to make grass,” Price says. “I used to think if I didn’t run grass through a cow, I was wasting it. Dormant grass left in the pasture doesn’t mean you’ve wasted it, but that it will play a role in developing organic matter for the soil; some of it will go to seed, and that’s a different kind of return.”

He now believes in taking one-third and leaving two-thirds of the grass to the soil.

It’s a relationship between cattleman, cow and the grass and water. The caretaker controlling what he can, and not worrying about what he can’t. Price will never be able turn the rain on and off, so he focuses on keeping every drop that lands on his place. He’s worked to turn his ranch into a sponge — adding shade to keep the ground temperature cool, reducing evaporation and balancing the ecosystem to stave off erosion.

It’s an outdoor renovation project, constantly underway, making the ground better one day at a time.

“I have a deed that says that I own the land, but eventually that’ll pass on to somebody else down the line,” Price says. “These resources are very valuable not only to us, but to our country and to our state. Once you recognize that they’re not making any more land, then you’ll manage it differently. There’s kind of a reverence and a moral responsibility to manage the land.”

Of course, he’s looking to the future, thinking of what kind of land he’ll leave for his son to ranch, but he also understands profitability today is a key component of sustaining something to leave behind.

“I’ve got to meet with my banker every year, and he’s not so concerned with how I do it, but just that I do it,” Price says. “We also say, along the way, the land must profit as well.”

It’s rangeland that was built with a role for cattle, a need for a hoof to press the seeds into the soil and distribute natural fertilizer to spur grass to grow. In the days of old, buffalo played this part as they roamed the plains.

The only thing that’s changed are the fences.

Rotational grazing has been key to 77 Ranch getting and giving from the relationship with the land. Price transitions his cattle like bison moved across the prairie, using the grass, adding to the ecosystem, but only staying in one place for a short time.

“Without cattle, these grasses become decadent and die,” Price says. “They become susceptible to wildfires that do tremendous property damage.”
It’s stories of management like this that McDonald’s executive leadership got to experience firsthand as Price hosted them for a tour. He answered questions about caring for the cattle, the land, the grass and the water — the positive changes he’s seen as he’s worked the land differently.

It’s a different story than the narrative of beef cattle harming the environment playing out in national media — a storyline both Price and McDonald’s are working to rewrite. McDonald’s has provided the opportunity to share this perspective as Price has visited their global headquarters in Chicago and through the company’s online channels.

He believes the industry is going to have to give an account for the carbon footprint of the cow, but also that she is an answer to some of the climate and sustainability issues buzzing in the headlines.

“We’re producing a product that is one of the most nutrient-dense proteins in the world and is a byproduct of all the great things they do for the environment,” Price says. “Why would you not want to eat that and distribute that?”

**SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES THAT PROFIT**

It’s cowboy logic that’s hard to argue, but not always easy to implement.

“There are many pieces to ranching,” says Price. “I obviously want the best genetics I can afford with my cattle, but if you look around in a lot of our country, there’s a lot of grass that never reached its genetic potential because of poor grazing management. I want that grass to flourish as well and I want to see how productive it can be if I manage it correctly.”

He’s partnered with organizations like Ducks Unlimited, the Noble Research Institute and the National Resources Conservation Service to learn and execute stewardship projects and best practices. It’s an eroding creekbank converted into a grazable wetland and duck lease. New lakes and stock tanks with thriving fish populations now dot his pastures. And it’s managing with better understanding of plant life — species once considered weeds that he now appreciates the greater role they play in his system.

“If we lose topsoil and it’s in the Gulf of Mexico, it’s of no value to anybody.”

— Gary Price, McDonald’s Flagship Farmer and rancher near Blooming Grove
This work converted the ranch into a wildlife enthusiast oasis where several of the 7.2 million people just 50 miles down the road in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex come to escape, hunt and fish.

“It’s not just food production anymore. It’s these other things that the land provides,” Price says.

He sees a future where ranchers who do right by the land, add value to their cattle.

“If you are doing good conservation work, that stores carbon, that also does good things for water, then there’s a market for that, and the market is tremendous,” says Price. “The doors have never been opened wider to show, and to be paid for that, the benefits that we provide with ecosystem services.”

For those looking to get started, Price suggests visiting a neighbor.

“Learn from those people that are doing it right and have done it sustainably over a long period of time,” he says, noting he didn’t get where he is today alone. “The sooner you start, the sooner you’ll reap the benefits.”

Conservation may seem to defy profitability, but he’s proven more is possible with less.

“Fewer cattle managed properly and can produce more product. We sell pounds. We don’t sell numbers of head,” he says.

It’s just shifting perspective from deeded acres to grazable acres, working to find the optimal level of grazing for an individual ranch. Instead of matching the local stocking rate, considering what the land and resources can support. These changes may not be easy, but persistence and attitude make the journey less strenuous according to the seasoned rancher.

“Most of the issues I deal with, I can go look in the mirror and see the problem,” he says with a chuckle. “It’s not others or the lack of rainfall or even the market swings. It’s thinking, what can I do to fix this? What can I do to make it better? And until I’ve done all of that, I really can’t blame anybody.”

Step one is cutting the fences between us, being transparent with progress that’s been made and continual improvement that is underway. As food companies are under constant pressure from consumers and stockholders to procure product that aligns with values and beliefs on climate impact, Price says it’s an opportunity to open the gates to show corporate America the carbon benefits of responsibly ranch-raised beef.

“There won’t be really any business that’s not affected by this climate conversation,” says Price. “All of them, regardless of how large the company is, are going to have to give an account to their whole supply chain and what they’ve done on carbon issues.”

McDonald’s is a clear example of one of many companies shifting expectations for producers. It’s not just their beef supply chain under pressure to prove sustainability. As one of the largest purchasers of food products globally, they are making it a key factor in sourcing decisions for wheat, potatoes, lettuce, coffee, tomatoes, milk, eggs, chicken and pork.

It’s not something food companies or producers can accomplish alone. As the work in tandem is ongoing with partnerships, and as programs like Flagship Farmers grow, it will take many more ranchers who are willing to answer the call.

Nicole Lane Erceg is a beef industry writer from Shreve, Ohio.