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Objective:

The purpose of the following prompt is to have students get comfortable with unfamiliar terminology. The goal is to aid students in understanding the prompt as quickly as possible, so that time will not be taken away from writing a response.

ON a sunny Sunday just before the vernal equinox, Rich Ciotola set out to clear a pasture strewn with fallen wood. The just-thawed field was spongy, with grass sprouting under tangled branches. While many farms were oiling and gassing up tractors, Mr. Ciotola was setting out to prepare a pasture using a tool so old it seems almost revolutionary: a team of oxen.

Mr. Ciotola, 32, is one of a number of small farmers who are turning — or rather returning — to animal labor to help with farming. Now, as diesel prices skyrocket, some farmers who have rejected many of the past century’s advances in agriculture have found a renewed logic in draft power. Partisans argue that animals can be cheaper to board and feed than any tractor. They also run on the ultimate renewable resource: grass.

“Ox don’t need spare parts, and they don’t run on fossil fuels,” Mr. Ciotola said. Animals are literally lighter on the land than machines. “A tractor would have left ruts a foot deep in this road,” Mr. Ciotola noted. In contrast, oxen or horses aerate the soil with their hooves as they go, preserving its fertile microbial layers. And as an added benefit, animals leave behind free fertilizer.

Oxen are also cheap, at least compared to a tractor, and can work for 10 to 14 years. Since the dairy industry relies on keeping cows pregnant so they lactate, millions of baby bulls are born each year.

Some young farmers are developing a hybrid practice, using oxen to supplement, rather than replace, tractors. Some use them just to log and plow, while others have their teams haul machines with engines. Even this can be energy efficient.

After this season’s first expedition, the oxen stood calmly in the dung-scented paddock, rolling their eyes and flicking their tails as Mr. Ciotola brushed them. “Even when it’s tough with them, it’s better than spending a day with a tractor,” he said. Then again, there was that time when he nearly took a horn to the groin. “A tractor doesn’t do that either,” he said.

(346 words Excerpted from “On Small Farms, Hoof Power Returns” By Tess Taylor).

Writing Directions

Read the passage above and write an essay responding to the ideas it presents. In your essay, be sure to summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author’s most important ideas. Develop your essay by identifying one idea in the passage that you feel is especially significant, and explain its significance. Support your claims with evidence or examples drawn from what

you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced. Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that are needed to help your reader follow your thinking. You will have 90 minutes to complete your essay.