Ranchers: America’s Rangeland Saviors

*Colorado study provides proof that private lands are best for native plants and animals.*

A report by Colorado State University (CSU) contends cattle ranches could be America’s best hope of preserving much of what remains of grasslands.

CSU wildlife biology professor Richard Knight, who conducted the research, says that in addition to preserving habitat for native plant and animal species, ranches help manage wildfires and prevent unwanted brush and cacti from taking over much of the open range.

Assisted by a wildlife biology graduate student and a faculty affiliate from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Knight began his research with the premise cattle grazing damages wildlife. The study was conducted from May through August in the foothills along the front range of the Rocky Mountains near Ft. Collins, Colorado. Areas studied were a mix of private ranches, public protected ranges, and multiple-acreage ranchettes.

For comparison, the study used the songbird, mammalian carnivore, and plant communities as indicators.

Consistently, native plant species were found in greater numbers on ranches, and nonnative plants were more prevalent on protected wildlife refuges and ranchettes. Knight says, “Ranches had the healthiest grasslands, the fewest number of weeds, and the least amount of bare ground.” He reports the protected areas and ranchettes were the weediest.

Also, ranches were found to be better habitat for wildlife than ranchettes. And, ranches and refuges supported populations of lesser-known species like Brewer’s sparrows and towhees.

Knight says those promoting an end to grazing on federal and other land are aiding and abetting the cause of developers. He says, “We need to protect ranching as a land use in the West because it actually gives us the best biological diversity of the alternative land uses, which is either protection without livestock grazing or homes.”

Knight adds, “The birds and carnivores were as good on ranches as they were on protected areas, but the plants were better because ranchers know the difference between native species and invasive ones, and they know how to use cows and herbicides effectively to control weeds.”

From *National Beef Producer*
REGIONAL GLCI SPOTLIGHTS

In The South... Texas’ Northeast Region hosted a GLCI Tour near Corsicana. Gary Price shared the value of native grasses with tour participants. Price’s property is a crown jewel of native grasses in the Blackland Prairie region of Texas and the result of focused management. Ironically, it is those very native grasses that have made the Blackland Prairie so fertile that it led to much of its demise. High quality cropland and introduced grasses are the dominant features today.

Price cites benefits of wildlife habitat, water retention on the land, water quality from the natural filtering, no fertilizer, and no feed bills other than mineral and protein supplementation. He does routine brush control by Individual Plant Treatment, making the observation that, “Hey, that brush is having a hard time struggling to survive the competition of those native grasses, so it is not aggressive at this point. I will not let it get the upper hand though.”

Texas GLCI Coordinator Mark Moseley says Price is the Chair of the Northeast Region GLCI, and anyone wanting to argue against native grasses with him had better bring a sack lunch and a lawn chair.

From The East... State coordinators from the Eastern GLCI Region participated in a joint meeting in Greensboro, NC in late September. Kevin Ogles, GLCI specialist for the eastern region reports that the purpose of the gathering was to share ideas within states and set priorities for upcoming grazing events.

Ogles says 18 of the 25 states and commonwealths under the east region area attended this first-ever meeting where state GLCI coordinators could sit down with their peers and share victories, failures, concerns, and frustrations. He adds that the highlight of the meeting was sharing ideas from the different states and seeing new networks among GLCI enthusiasts formed.

National GLCI Coordinator Kim Stine and NRCS’s Dennis Thompson were also in attendance. Five volunteers from among themselves planned the meeting. The Eastern Region plans to move forward and stay connected through a quarterly teleconference.

Call For Abstracts

Submit your presentation or poster abstract for the 3rd National Conference on Grazing Lands

Deadline: March 2006

Within each category will be five topic areas.

They are:

1) Ag-Urban Interface
2) Cutting Edge Management Technologies
3) Economic and Marketing Implications of Grazing
4) Public Policy Implications of Grazing
5) Optimizing Grazing Lands Health for Environmental Benefits

For more information about submitting an abstract contact program chairman John Spain at jbspain@att.net or call him at 479-789-2635. Or contact GLCI Specialist Leonard Jolley at 503-273-2430 or leonard.jolley@por.usda.gov.

Grazing Events

Jan. 8-11, 2006: American Farm Bureau Federation Annual Convention, Nashville, TN


Jan. 29-Feb. 2: National Association of Conservation Districts Annual Meeting, Houston, TX

Feb. 1-4: National Cattlemen’s Beef Association Annual Convention, Denver, CO

Feb. 3-4: PAS Conference, Penn State. FMI call Troy Bishop at 315-824-9849.

Feb. 12-17: Society for Range Management Annual Meeting, Vancouver, British Columbia


March 3-6: National Farmers Union Convention, Denver, CO

March 11-14: American Forage and Grassland Council Annual Meeting, San Antonio, TX
Watching the Weather

Tools are available to track weather trends and help make important decisions for your ranch.

By Kindra Gordon

Wouldn’t it be nice to know if this winter was going to be colder than normal, or to have an idea if next spring’s precipitation was expected to be above – or below – average? Weather forecasting technology does track such outlooks, and the Internet now makes it possible for producers to watch weather trends from their home computer.

Brian Fuchs, regional climatologist with the High Plains Regional Climate Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, says there are several forecast tools available on a variety of websites that can help producers prepare for weather trends that are expected for two or three months out and even 12 months ahead.

Fuchs explains that these forecast tools are not pinpointing what the temperature will be on a specific day, but instead are designed to give weather trends and patterns for a particular region. For instance, they predict if temperatures are expected to be warmer or cooler than average for a given time frame, and if precipitation is expected to be above or below normal during that time.

“When making grazing decisions, monitoring temperature and precipitation outlooks for your region for one to six months ahead can help producers evaluate decisions for their ranching operation,” Fuchs says. For instance, a producer may decide to wean calves earlier if the outlook is for below normal precipitation. Or, a producer may consider buying additional stockers to graze if abundant precipitation is expected.

He adds, “The drought the last few years has already forced many producers to evaluate weather trends and their ranch practices to see what they can do to streamline their operations.”

What to Watch

When tracking weather trends, Fuchs says a starting point is to keep an eye on what’s happening around the globe. “A major weather event in one part of the world does affect other parts of the world. So it is good to be aware of that,” Fuchs says.

He suggests tracking global climate models as well as climate conditions for your local area because they all interact. For instance, global climate models can help identify the onset of an El Nino or La Nina weather event beginning in the Pacific Ocean. (An El Nino is the warming of the tropical waters of the Pacific; whereas La Nina is a cooling of the tropical waters.)

These can create large scale weather systems that will affect the entire U.S. at once. An El Nino will typically have a positive influence on precipitation from October through December and through spring and summer across the Western Dakotas, Nebraska, Wyoming and Colorado. A La Nina typically means colder temperatures through fall and winter.

One of Fuchs’ favorite sites for producers interested in monitoring weather patterns is the Climate Prediction Center homepage at http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/. It provides global climate models up to a year ahead, as well as short term outlooks for the upcoming 8 to 14 days. The site updates global climate trends monthly, and also offers links to several useful weather sites.

To specifically track the El Nino or La Nina Forecasts visit http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/lalina/ensoforecast.html. Here, the actual sea surface temperatures are provided with forecasts 12 months out. An indicator of a strong El Nino would show sea temperatures 4-5 degrees Celsius above normal. And, temperatures 3 degrees Celsius below average would indicate a strong La Nina.

Fuchs explains that El Nino and La Nina are natural occurrences every few years, but there is no exact cycle. They do influence temperatures and precipitation across the U.S. when they occur and usually last 6 to 8 months but may last up to 18 months.

How might a producer prepare if an El Nino or La Nina is forecast? Fuchs suggests that in a La Nina instance – where temperatures may be below normal in the October to December time frame – a producer may want to make sure he has adequate feed supplies to take care of his herd during that time of potentially colder weather. In an El Nino instance, with a tendency for wetter than normal conditions October to March, producers with spring calving herds may want to make special preparations to get newborn calves out of the wet weather, Fuchs says.

Fuchs suggests that producers may also make adjustments to grazing and haying decisions based on if an El Nino is forecast, where wetter conditions may produce more available forage, versus if a La Nina is predicted.

Other Useful Info

If you are seeking specific weather details for your area, Fuchs recommends the National Weather Service Location Map at http://www.crh.noaa.gov/. This site allows you to click on a local area to track current climate conditions and next week’s forecast.

He also suggests that producers utilize drought maps online which offer precipitation totals and show the departure from normal in both percent and inches – or any drought recovery that is occurring. “This is a tool to monitor conditions and base forage decisions on,” he says. See the US Drought Monitor at http://drought.unl.edu/dm/monitor.html.

Lastly, Fuchs says weather outlooks are a tool that should be followed on a regular basis. “It is not a tool that a producer should look at one month and make operational business decisions on,” he cautions, and explains that these outlooks, like several weather models, will trend in one direction or another, with adjustments made to them during monthly updates.
Congratulations to Pennsylvania’s Project Grass for holding a successful grazing conference and farm tours Oct. 18-19, 2005 near Meadville, PA. Hosted by the North West Project Grass Chapter, the event had 145 participants in attendance. Of those, 95 were producers. The theme for the conference was the versatility of grazing and how it can fit onto different farms with different practices. Numerous awards were given to successful graziers from around the state, and a highlight of the event was guest speaker Dennis Wolff, the Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture (see photo at right). Hats off to Candace Burke and her crew for their 25 years of dedication to Pennsylvania’s Project Grass program.

Accolades should also go to GLCI founder and emeritus steering committee member John “Chip” Merrill. Merrill has earned much recognition for his lifetime of service to conservation, and most recently, he was bestowed the prestigious National Golden Spur Award by the Ranching Heritage Association. The award was presented Oct. 29, 2005 in Texas. The late Dick Kjerstad, who was also a former GLCI steering committee member, also recently received posthumous recognition from his alma mater South Dakota State University for his support of the Steers for State program, which helps fund rodeo scholarships. GLCI is proud of its affiliation with these industry leaders and their contributions to agriculture.

As we move into January and February, it’s annual conference time for many of our GLCI partner organizations. See the calendar of upcoming events on page 2. GLCI representation will be on hand at many of these events, and we look forward to the opportunity to discuss ideas and build support for voluntary technical assistance on private grazing lands. The pinnacle of these events will be the Spring GLCI Steering Committee Meeting Feb. 26-27, 2006 in Washington, DC. This is always a great opportunity to meet with our nation’s decision makers and inform them of GLCI goals and accomplishments.

Bob Drake, Chairman
National GLCI Steering Committee

To have your GLCI activities or upcoming events highlighted in this newsletter contact Kindra Gordon at phone 605-722-7699 or kindra@gordonresources.com

Visit the GLCI homepage at http://www.glci.org