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A voluntary partnership with private landowners

What do good grazing managers know that you don't?

Here, they share some of their insight.

By Kindra Gordon

Finding lower cost, more efficient ways to operate is a mindset that has come back in vogue during the last two years of the downturn in the economy. But, it's a mantra that good grazing managers know is essential to profitability – and sustainability – no matter what trend the larger economic picture is facing.

That message was prominent among the expertise and experiences shared by grazing managers during the 10th annual Nebraska Grazing Conference held last August in Kearney, Neb.

Neal Dennis, a commercial beef producer and custom grazer from Saskatchewan, Canada, shared that he grew up in a family livestock operation that did things conventionally, "We looked after the animals and not the land." But difficult financial times during the 80's and 90's forced Dennis and his wife to look to alternatives to help their farm's profitability and their quality of life.

This led them to a new focus on holistic management, which they've taken numerous courses on over the past decade. Today, Dennis says he lives by the principle "if you look after the land, it will look after you." And he adds, "The nation [or producer] that destroys it's soil, destroys itself."

That said, here's the list of lessons gleaned from Dennis and other grazing enthusiasts based on their own trial and error.

1. Strive for soil health

To improve soil health – and future forage productivity – Dennis is a firm believer in using high stock densities for a short duration. He utilizes mob grazing, bale grazing and massage grazing in which animal impact and herd effect is utilized to thicken range and pasture stands, increase plant diversity, and increase forage production.

Regarding these high stock density strategies, Dennis says, "When I leave a paddock, I want every square inch to have a footprint. Then I allow adequate recovery time for that area." He reports that with this change in management, he has increased his land's carrying capacity by 300%.

But he cautions that ample recovery time to allow the plants to regrow and reproduce seed is essential before the plant is grazed again. "If a plant is regrazed before it is fully recovered, it's future growth will be reduced or the plant may die."

Dennis admits to learning this lesson the hard way. He says in the late 80's he was using rotational grazing – but he wasn't allowing enough recovery time for the plants. Now, he may mob graze an area and not return to it until the following year.

For those naysayers who think Dennis's forage management style won't work on their ranches, he points out that he is in a region that only receives an average of 12-13 inches of rainfall annually. He says: "It's not about how much rain you get, it's how much you hold in the soil."

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2. Don't do the same thing all the time.

Are you grazing the same pasture every spring? Do you take the same path across the pasture when you drive out to check the herd? Dennis says good grazing managers learn that they have to try different things. "Take a different route every time you drive across a field or pasture to avoid compaction," he says as an example.

Likewise, he is adamant that land managers must break away from the traditional mentality of grazing certain pastures at the same time every year. "The land has to be treated different from year to year. Don't hit the same paddock at the same time every year. Grazing in different seasons from one year to the next will promote a diversity of plant species," he says.

Dennis likes the idea of trying different stock densities, too, and he encourages producers to experiment and learn what works for them. He suggests, "Try something new on 10 acres and see what happens. That won't cost you the whole farm. Learn from the experience and adapt."

Skim grazing is one experiment he suggests producers try. It's where you graze plants and move the cattle based on the conditions. For example, you take 80% of the leaf material early in the grazing season when plants have time to regrow and recover. When you move to another pasture, if plants are reaching their peak, you may only skim and take 40% of the plant – or even 20% depending on time of year and conditions – so that the majority of the root mass and seeds remain and next year's growth isn't adversely affected.

Dennis even suggests taking grazing management classes from different experts. "You have the opportunity to learn different things from different people," he says.

3. Weeds are a wake-up call.

"Weeds are a symptom, not a problem," says Dennis. He adds, "No weed can stand up to good healthy grass. Weeds like bare ground and no competition. When you spray, you take the competition away." Thus, he says the best way to deal with weeds is to recognize that something isn't right and a grazing management change is needed instead.

4. Consider adding cool season forages.

Good grazing managers know that the longer you can extend your grazing season from spring through winter the lower your supplemental feed and labor costs will be. Keith Harmoney, a forage researcher at the Kansas State University Ag Research Center in Hays, has been conducting research trials on cool-season grasses for the past decade.

Harmoney says that perennial cool season grasses can serve as a complement to warm season native rangelands from April through June and also from September through November for producers in the western Great Plains.

But which species is worth the investment? From his studies testing persistence and productivity of ten different varieties, Harmoney reports that Western wheatgrass (Barton and Flintock varieties) and Russian wildrye (Bozoisky) are more tolerant of heat and drought than other perennial cool season grasses tested.

5. Stock for flexibility.

If there's one lesson Jim Carr has learned over the years it's the need to be flexible. The Burwell, Neb. rancher reminds producers, "It's not a question of when or where we'll have a drought. It's a cycle." But, this year, Mother Nature dealt him just the opposite – destructive flooding.

To that end, Carr says, "In ag we always need to remember how fragile our ecosystem is." And, Carr recognizes that he must be able to adapt to whatever the environment throws his way. His key for flexibility is the ability to quickly change his stock rate. "I stock my range with 30% of disposable cattle by weight," the longtime rancher says.

6. Plan ahead and train the next generation.

Carr also says that for ranch and range management success to come full circle, landowners must recognize the importance of training the next generation to be capable managers.

Particularly for family operations preparing to transition from one generation to the next, Carr advocates young people go to work for other ranch managers or ag businesses for a few years before returning to the family operation – "to gain experience and appreciation," Carr says.

John McGlynn, a financial planner and Nebraska ranch owner, gives similar advice to future ranchers. He says, "Go work someplace else for a while or go get an MBA. Ranches are businesses. Bright people may know genetics and grass, but many end up going broke because they don't know business."

McGlynn adds that a successful business "isn't about how much money you gross, it's about how much you keep."

He suggests with generational transitioning of a ranch the parties involved have a timeline and a plan; they test drive it, and then several years before the actual transfer, adopt a formal ownership plan and put things in writing.

Along with that, Carr notes the importance of communication and coaching from the current generation as they share their knowledge with future ranchers. He suggests:

- Be mentors to guide them;
- Have the patience to be teachers to help develop their skills;
- Judge and evaluate their progress and share that feedback with them; and
- Be an encourager to cheer them on to pursue their goals.

Editor's Note: The 11th annual Nebraska Grazing Conference will be held Aug. 9-10, 2011 in Kearney, NE.

GLCI STATE SPOTLIGHT: MONTANA

Most cattlemen have a "calving book" in which they record calf birth dates, birth weights, tag numbers and the like – but how about a "Grazing Record Book?" Why not dedicate a book to recording rainfall, grazing dates in specific pastures, number of bales harvested from specific fields, wildlife activity, etc?

The Stockman's Grazing Record is a three-ring binder that will allow you to do just that, and create a historical record of grazing and pasture management and weather events through the years. Ultimately it becomes a great tool for decision making and monitoring.

Created by Jim Carrig, the record book is available through the Montana GLCI for $20. A few pages at the front of the binder provide grazing usage guidelines, terminology definitions and provide examples on how to utilize the record book.

For more information, contact Montana GLCI Co-Coordinators Jon Siddoway at jon.siddoway@mt.usda.gov or Carla Lawrence at carla.lawrence@mt.usda.gov.

USDA Introduces Online Tool to Assist Beginning and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers

USDA has established an online tool that can link retiring farmers who have expiring Conservation Reserve Program contracts with beginning farmers or ranchers who are interested in bringing the land into production. The new online resource, TIP Net, is a website provided by the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

Through the Transition Incentives Program (TIP), producers with land for sale or lease are introduced to qualified beginning or socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers who want to buy or rent land for their operations.

"The interest in TIP during the first six months of implementation has far exceeded our expectations," reports Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. "This tool should facilitate the transition of land to our next generation of farmers."

TIP provides up to two additional Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) annual rental payments to a retired or retiring owner or operator with an expiring CRP contract. To qualify, the landowner must sell or lease the CRP land to a beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher so the new operator can convert some or all of the land to production using sustainable grazing or crop production methods.

As of Nov. 30, 2010, TIP participation included 372 contracts on more than 52,000 acres, with nearly $5 million obligated for TIP annual rental payments.

For beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers who cannot qualify for conventional credit, FSA offers financing as well. FSA makes direct loans and guaranteed loans made by conventional farm lenders to finance the purchase and operation of a farm. In addition to the funding reserves, FSA operates a special "down payment" loan program to assist socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers in purchasing a farm. Like TIP, this program can help retiring farmers transfer their land to future generations.

Additional information on FSA farm loan programs is available online at www.fsa.usda.gov or from any FSA office. TIP Net can be found online at http://www.fsa.usda.gov/tipnet.

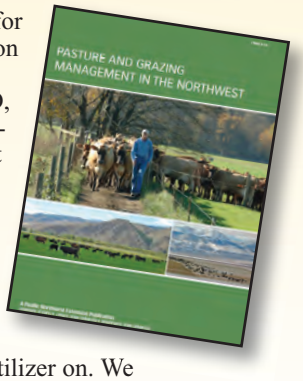
GRAZING RESOURCES FOR EAST & WEST

In the East…There are over 3 million acres of grasslands in New York State that are not currently being used for agricultural production. This presents an opportunity for the state to encourage economic development on these lands that will lead to job creation, enhance regional and local food security, and contribute to sustainable agriculture enterprises. A report, titled **Green Grass, Green Jobs: Increasing Livestock Production on Underutilized Grasslands in New York State**, has been published by the Cornell Small Farms Workteam on Grasslands Utilization. The report focuses on recommended actions in research, education, extension, and policy to realize the potential of New York State's grasslands as a farming resource.

Topics discussed in the report include: Why increased livestock utilization of New York's grasslands makes sense; Livestock production and marketing opportunities; Barriers to increased livestock utilization of New York State grasslands; and Recommendations and inventory of grasslands management resources of New York State landowners and farmers. The Green Grass, Green Jobs booklet is available as a free download from the Cornell Small Farms Web site at this link: http://www.smallfarms.cornell.edu/pages/projects/workteams/GU/grasslands.cfm.

In the West…A comprehensive pasture and grazing management guide for the Northwest includes detailed chapters on cell grazing, pasture irrigation, nutrient management and fertility. University of Idaho forage specialist Glenn Shewmaker, edited the publication with Mylen Bohle, Oregon State University Extension agronomist.

Called **Pasture and Grazing Management in the Northwest**, the 208-page book has been a work in progress for more than five years, Shewmaker says. It will be used to help train Extension and Natural Resources Conservation Service workers as well as be available to growers.



It includes a chapter on cell grazing written by grazing expert Jim Gerrish and Charles Cheyney, Butte County, ID, Extension educator. "That is a highlight, because it's on cell design and how you can accommodate irrigation management into the design," Shewmaker adds. "I don't know of any other publication that really talks about the best method of water-fence development in association with irrigation systems, especially pivot irrigation systems."

The guide also includes a chapter on animal behavior – examining the times of day animals eat and how producer-instigated changes can affect animal performance, production and behavior.

A chapter on fertility and nutrient management of pastures is another highlight of the publication, Shewmaker says. "In this area, where pastures are part of a cropping system, everybody is in the habit of applying fertilizer based on annual cropping systems. They don't understand the differences of permanent vegetation.

"For example, you can do a soil nitrogen test in a well-managed pasture and you won't find a whole lot of N just in the soil. It's taken up fairly quickly. But that doesn't necessarily mean you need to dump a whole bunch of fertilizer on. We spent quite a bit of time on good fertility management (in the guide) to get across to producers the real cycling nature of nutrients in a pasture situation and the sustainability of that."

The publication can be ordered (cost is $18) by calling 208-885-7982, emailing calspubs@uidaho.edu or online at http://www.cals.uidaho.edu/edComm/detail.asp?IDnum=1586.

Forage Focus: Rethinking Crabgrass as a Weed vs. Forage

Crabgrass is a troublesome weed for most people. But with a little careful planning and management, forage specialists have found it can be a first rate forage.

University of Nebraska Extension forage specialist Bruce Anderson says, "Yes - crabgrass can be a problem. But it also can be an outstanding forage grass when used in the right place, at the right time, in the right way."

Anderson says, "Cattle love crabgrass. When given a choice, cattle will graze crabgrass before almost any other forage. That's why you rarely see much of it in pastures. And they perform well, too. Steers have gained over two and one-half pounds per day on well-managed crabgrass."

He shares that some folks simply graze crabgrass that volunteers naturally after wheat. Others use crabgrass in a double crop program by planting it after grazing out rye or another small grain. Later, when the crabgrass goes dormant during cooler weather, a small grain is drilled again, directly into the crabgrass residue. It also can be grown in combination with sudangrass, pearl millet, or forage corn.

Anderson suggests that to use crabgrass most effectively, natural reseeding should be encouraged so the crop doesn't need to be planted each year. This might cause some lower animal production as you delay use to assure good seed production, especially during the first year. After that, plenty of seed probably will be in the soil for several years.

He adds that like other grasses, crabgrass responds well to nitrogen fertilizer, irrigation, and rotational grazing.

Crabgrass Stats

- Crabgrass is well-adapted from central Nebraska to Texas and to the East Coast. Growers in Iowa, southern Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania have also said it's done well for them.
- The ideal time to initially establish crabgrass is March or April.
- A 3-6 lb/acre seeding rate is recommended.
- If you want the grass to reseed, stop grazing it 3-4 weeks before a killing frost to allow seed to set.
- For seed visit www.redrivercrabgrass.com

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

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(303) 771-3500

Dairy Industry
(517) 323-6575

National Association of
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National Cattlemen's
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National Farmers Union
(202) 554-1600

Society for Range
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(303) 986-3309

Soil and Water
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