Texas Tour Showcases Grazing Management Success

Two Texas ranches shared their ranching experiences with grazing enthusiasts during the National GLCI Steering Committee Fall Business Meeting and Tour held September 9-11, 2004 in Fort Worth. The ranch visits included Winscott Ranch near Cresson, TX owned by Ed Bass, and the JA Ranch near Bowie, TX owned and operated by J.K. “Rooter” Brite, his wife Lynda and their son JK. Rooter is a member of the National GLCI Steering Committee.

The National GLCI Steering Committee, The Texas Coalition of GLCI, the Oklahoma Grazing Lands Conservation Association, AgWorkers Mutual Auto Insurance and the Upper Elm-Red and Parker County Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Texas sponsored the tour.

Both ranches are stellar examples of integrating prescribed fire, brush and weed control and grazing management into their livestock operations to remain successful through trying times. Here are their stories:

Winscott Ranch, Cresson, TX

Located in the Grand Prairie region of Johnson County, about 20 miles southwest of Fort Worth, this working cattle ranch has traditionally been a stocker steer operation. It is one of several ranches Mr. and Mrs. Ed Bass own as part of their Bluestem Cattle Company. They also have ranches in Tarrant and Parker Counties in Texas and Chase County in the Flint Hills of Kansas.

Bluestem Cattle Co. is managed as a yearling steer operation based around short term, seasonal, high intensity grazing and a rotational prescribed burning program. Much of the Winscott Ranch is virgin tallgrass prairie that has never been plowed and has been well managed for many years. Several old cropland fields on the ranch have been allowed to naturally reseeded to native grasses.

A four- to five-year prescribed fire cycle is used to maintain biodiversity and productivity of the ranch. Prescribed burning is generally planned for about 20-25% of the rangeland, usually in early February of each year.

Drought, grasshoppers and unplanned wildfire are challenges to which the ranch has had to adapt. Therefore, they count flexibility as an important management tool for their ranch.

The stocker operation also allows plenty of flexibility to adjust to current weather conditions, forage resources and markets. Stockers arrive on the ranch between March and April, and graze the native range until early July, with July 4 being the targeted shipping date.

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Texas Tour Showcases Grazing Management Success

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These current management strategies have helped the ranch stay viable for livestock as well as provide ample habitat for Texas wildlife.

**JA Ranch, Bowie, TX**

Rooter Brite and his son J.K. represent the third and fourth generations to own and operate this 3,400-acre Texas ranch. It is a diversified operation consisting of a 225 head Hereford cow/calf herd, 40 to 75 replacement heifers, and 400 to 500 stocker steers annually.

The cow/calf operation is run primarily on native tallgrass rangeland, with a stocking rate of about one animal unit per 10 acres. The best range sites on the ranch can produce 5,000 to 6,000 pounds of forage during good years.

The winter stocker operation is run on small grain pastures usually beginning the first of November. Stocking rate for the stocker operation starts at 500 pounds per acre in the fall and increases to about 900 pounds per acre for grazing out under good condition. Average daily gain for stockers ranges from 1.6 pounds per day to more than three pounds per day depending on cattle size and quality.

The Brites' rotational grazing program includes a total of 49 pastures and fields, which range from 20 to 170 acres in size. Separate rotational grazing systems are maintained for fall calving cows, spring calving cows, first calf heifers, replacement heifers, stocker steers and stocker heifers. In addition to the efficiency of utilizing their forages, Rooter reports that rotational grazing and frequent contact with the cattle have made the cattle calmer and easier to handle as well.

The Brites also use intensive grazing as a means of weed control. Selected pastures with weed problems are subjected to a very high stock density for a three-week period during early spring. This can be very successful if timed correctly, according to Rooter. Prescribed fire is another tool used in years when there is adequate moisture and fine fuel loads. This helps control many weeds and freshens up overstory mature grasses.

Brush control is achieved by aerial spraying. On prairie pastures this is done in early spring on a 4-year rotational basis, with approximately one-third of the ranch sprayed each year for three years and no spraying done the fourth year. Good grazing management and hand removal of mesquite and cedar have also helped keep the JA prairie pastures free from invading brush.

Along with their attention to livestock production, wildlife habitat is also a major interest on the JA Ranch. Aerial spraying for control of brush and weeds is done in wide strips to provide sufficient cover and food for deer, turkey, and quail. Rooter aims to maintain a 15% canopy cover of trees and shrubs in each pasture for wildlife. Several areas scattered throughout the ranch are managed primarily for wildlife. Human activity is highly restricted in these areas and grazing is allowed only one or two weeks during the year. Islands have also been constructed in the middle of several ponds to enhance waterfowl habitat.

Water quality is at the forefront of the JA Ranch's conservation efforts. In 1999 Rooter developed a non-point source pollution abatement plan for the entire ranch in cooperation with the Upper Elm-Red Soil and Water Conservation District. The ranch maintains an adequate cover and an annual water test is done below their primary confinement facility. Tests indicate that the water quality from this site exceeds EPA's safe drinking water standards. This is surely a testament to good land management!

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**Reception Held In Sammis' Honor**

Gretchen Sammis, a rancher from Cimarron, New Mexico and a member of the National GLCI Steering Committee was the guest of honor at a reception at the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth during the GLCI Fall Business Meeting. Sammis, a lifelong rancher is an honoree at the Hall of Fame. Since 1954, she has owned and operated the 11,000-acre Chase Ranch in New Mexico, which was originally established in 1867 by her great-grandfather.

Sammis' work in the education community, and her leadership in natural resource management and public policy led to her induction into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 1996. She has served as a National Association of Conservation Districts representative on the National GLCI Steering Committee since 1994.
SD, WY Host Management Conference

The South Dakota and Wyoming Grasslands Coalitions teamed up with the South Dakota and Wyoming Sections of the Society for Range Management to host a successful grazing management conference Oct. 6-8 in Hot Springs, SD.

“Adapting to Change” was the theme of the symposium and Ed Burton, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) state conservationist in Wyoming, addressed the group saying, “Change is a way of life. How we embrace it determines our success or failure.”

Burton pointed out that with the most recent Farm Bill, Wyoming NRCS has gone from having $2 million in conservation programs to offering $16 million this past year. Burton says that has been beneficial for land resources, and says that in Wyoming they’ll continue to be committed to offer voluntary, technical assistance to producers and to form partnerships with private partners and conservation sectors. He added, “I’m proud of our partnerships to achieve these goals for the land.”

Everett Bain, NRCS state range management specialist in Wyoming, provided an update of GLCI activities in his state. He reported that Wyoming has had much success in working with ranchers who now visit local schools and share with students about grazing and range management. Wyoming is also initiating a grant program, which private landowners can apply for from $2,000 to $5,000 to put toward weed control on their lands.

Laverne Koch, South Dakota Grasslands Coalition president reported that his state is working to develop an educational video to highlight six grazing demonstration sites that have been established on working ranches across the state. South Dakota has also had success in hosting several grazing seminars and a bus tour during the past six months.

In balancing environmental concerns with ranching, Wyoming rancher Mark Eisele told the group that future ranch success hinges on efforts to educate and inform the public. Eisele shared his experience of running a ranch situated just four miles from Cheyenne, WY. “We are next to housing developments, the city landfill, and the city’s water treatment plant. We’re constantly being watched,” he reports.

Eisele says that because his ranch is so visible, he’s had to find solutions, some of which have included being progressive about irrigation, wind energy, and weed management. But, “Most important is education,” Eisele says. “Let people know you are doing good things. Speak at events, host tours, and field days for everyone from school kids to consumers in the grocery store. The public has to understand why we do what we do,” he adds.

The three-day conference concluded with a tour of the Whitney Preserve, a Nature Conservancy property in the southern Black Hills. The nearly 5,000-acre property was slated for a housing development before the Nature Conservancy was able to purchase the land. They now offer it for cattle grazing, wildlife habitat and hunting, and an outdoor classroom for the public.

A coordinated resource management team with specialists from several disciplines and agencies direct goals and management of the property.

The Nature Conservancy’s Bob Budd of Lander, WY pointed out that this is a successful example of helping preserve open space and conserve natural resources. But, Budd says, on a larger scale the private landowner is where conservation has to start. Budd says, “No entity can buy enough land to do what has to be done. It has to be done as a team and incentives need to be given to producers for providing the land, wildlife and recreation values that the public wants.”

- Compiled by Krista Gordon

Upcoming Grazing Events

Nov. 9-10: Utah State University will host a Forage Kochia Workshop and Tour at Logan, UT. For more information contact Blair Waldron at 435-797-3073 or e-mail blair.waldron@usu.edu.

Nov. 15-16: “Strategies for Sustainability” is the focus of the Central California Agriculture Symposium in Paso Robles, CA. For more information contact the California Resource Conservation District at 916-457-7904 or visit www.carcd.org/ag_symposium.

Feb. 6-11, 2005: “Rangeland Trails under the Lone Star” is the theme of the 58th annual meeting of the Society for Range Management in Fort Worth, TX. For more information visit www.rangelands.org.

For other grazing events visit www.glci.org and click on Upcoming Events.

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NRCS Chief Bruce Knight meets with National GLCI Coordinator Kim Stine and Steering Committee Chair Bob Drake.

There was great participation and an outstanding tour at GLCI’s fall business meeting in early September in Fort Worth. We were especially pleased to have NRCS Chief Bruce Knight address our group at the meeting and listen to our concerns about technical assistance for grazing on private lands. For more about the ranch tour, see the story on page 1 of this newsletter. I’ll highlight some of the GLCI business discussions from the meeting below.

Firstly is the announcement that Kim Stine has been selected as the new National GLCI Coordinator; she will headquarter in Ft. Worth, TX. Previously Kim was in Lincoln, NE, where she served as GLCI’s Northern Great Plains Regional Coordinator. Over the summer months, restructuring has taken place within the GLCI regional coordinators moving them from regional locations into three NRCS technical service centers in Oregon, Texas, and North Carolina. With this change, we have unfortunately lost all of our previous coordinators with the exception of Dan Caudle who continues his post in Texas. Five regional positions were advertised this fall and we hope to have them filled off and running by the new year. Our hats off to previous coordinators Sid Brantly, Jim Wallace, Sam Linkenknoker, and Meg Bishop for their outstanding service to GLCI, and we wish them well in their future endeavors.

Leadership of the National GLCI Steering Committee remains the same with me, Bob Drake as Chairman, Flavius Barker as Vice-Chair, and Rooter Brite as Secretary - Treasurer. We do welcome some new members to our committee, including Steve Koepfen from Oklahoma City, OK, representing the American Farm Bureau Federation; and Pat Pfief of Arcadia, FL, serving as alternate representative for the Society for Range Management. The National Association of Conservation Districts has named Kristen Harten as their new executive as well, and we welcome all of these new partners to the GLCI effort.

Looking ahead, GLCI will be compiling a list of grazing-related research priorities and presenting them to the Agricultural Research Service. Early planning is also underway for the 3rd National Conference on Grazing Lands to be held Dec. 9-13, 2006 in St. Louis, MO. We are also in talks with the American Forage and Grasslands Council to hold a joint meeting in Louisville, Kentucky in 2008.

In the not so distant future, the annual spring GLCI meeting in Washington, DC will be Monday, March 14, 2005. This is always an important event to create awareness for private lands and grazing issues with our nation’s leaders, we hope to have many GLCI supporters in attendance.

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