Converting From Crops to Cattle
This Nebraska couple now runs 900 pairs under five pivots.

By Kindra Gordon

Just three years ago, Josh and Kristy Wendell of Dickens, NE, operated a farm that included irrigated corn and large combines to harvest their crop. Today, they still use the irrigated pivots on that same land, but instead they are growing forage crops and grasses — all harvested by 900 cow calf pairs.

Kristy says they made the switch from crops to cattle on this portion of their large family run farming operation in west-central Nebraska because “grazing this land just made sense.”

She explains that eight years ago the family took note that the cropland was burned from chemical applications, and the sandy soils had very little organic matter. At that time, a transition was made to more organic chemicals and environmentally-friendly farming methods. Then three years ago, an even greater change was made when a portion of the cropland was planted to alfalfa-grass mix as they prepared to switch to an intensive, rotational grazing system.

Their Willow Creek Cattle Co. herd, which includes commercial cattle owned by the Wendells, Josh’s parents and his sister, now graze almost year-round — even though the Wendells do not have any native grass.

Calving begins mid-January with first-calf heifers on corn stubble, and the remainder of the herd calves in April; by mid-April the cattle graze irrigated fields planted to wheat, rye and turnips. In June the animals begin to rotate through the five pivots that are planted to grass. Each pivot is divided into four pastures, and the herd of 900 is split into two groups and moved every 3 to 5 days depending on forage conditions. Each pasture is rested at least 30 days between grazing periods. After harvest, the cows go back on to crop stubble through the winter.

Of their transition to a grazing enterprise, Kristy admits there has been a huge learning curve. She says, “The farm was built for crops not livestock, so we’ve had to fence, develop miles and miles of water, as well as put up facilities for cattle – basically, reshape our machinery.”

During the process they’ve participated in numerous tours, schools and seminars to learn more about grazing management and have also worked with NRCS in developing and cost-sharing things like cross-fencing and water developments.

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Dana Larsen, Nebraska’s NRCS state rangeland management specialist, points out that cropland conversion back to grazing land, like the Wendells have done, may fit other operations too, because it can create alternatives to extend the grazing season, rest native pastures, and/or supply additional needed forage during drought.

Larsen adds that the forage production potential on irrigated land can be impressive even with lowered inputs of fertilizer and water. Proper management of these systems, like the Wendells’ plan that allows each pasture at least a 30-day rest between grazing periods, is also key.

“Their care in managing the grasses under a grazing system will help sustain high production levels for several years,” Larsen says of the Wendells’ operation.

Overall, Kristy reports that they’ve been pleased with their irrigated pastures, but she cautions others who may be considering a switch from crops to permanent pastures that it is not an overnight process. “It requires a lot of hard work, planning, and lots of fencing.” She adds that even after three years they have not greatly reduced their irrigated water needs. “The drought hasn’t helped, but it also takes about three years to get the forages in the pastures really established.”

Despite the work, the Wendells are optimistic for the future of their grazing program, and eventually have the goal of marketing their cattle through a grass-fed beef program. Kristy reports that they’ve done some of their own processing already for farmer’s markets and are in talks with larger grass-fed beef suppliers. She adds that someday they’d like to take the whole farm to grass pivots.

Can irrigated pastures work for you?

For other producers considering a switch to irrigated grass pastures, ag economist Dick Clark and range and forage specialist Jerry Volesky, both with theUniversity of Nebraska, suggest producers evaluate three cost factors including:
1) cost of pasture establishment,
2) annual operating costs for grazing and maintaining the pasture, and
3) the opportunity cost of alternative uses on that land.

While first-year pasture establishment costs can run about $175 per acre (which includes seed cost, fencing, and water development), Clark says when looking at the big picture, that may be a worthwhile investment. “When properly managed, some of these pastures can last 25 years. So if you spread that cost out, you may only be looking at a cost of about $12 per acre over that time period,” he says.

He adds that often the extra pounds of beef produced can also be profitable, despite the expense.

To learn more about the Wendells’ grazing program, contact them at jwendell@nebnet.net.

Ways to use irrigated pastures:

- Graze pairs from April through July and then move them to native pastures, stockpile the irrigated forage and return to those pastures in the fall;
- Graze stockers ahead of pairs in the irrigated system; or
- Run pairs on the irrigated pastures from May to August, wean the calves and put them back on the irrigated pastures and move the cows to native range.

Pennsylvania’s Project Grass: Going Strong for 24 Years

In 1980 a handful of visionary land stewards in Pennsylvania initiated a grazing partnership effort with conservation and livestock groups and producers. Today, “PA Project Grass” has a 24-year history with several success stories and even more partnerships across the state.

As Candace Burke states in their summer 2004 Project Grass magazine, “Project Grass is not just another educational environmental group.” Instead, they are proud of their ability to assist in implementing “on-the-ground” conservation practices.

Technical support is provided to land managers through five Project Grass Chapters in the state – each of which has an NRCS grazing specialist who coordinates multi-county activities including field days, quarterly education meetings, a youth grazing scholarship program, and an annual statewide conference and field day.

Pennsylvania’s Project Grass also delivers the grazing message through a regular magazine full of useful information and a website at www.paprojectgrass.org.

Upcoming Grazing Events

Oct. 6-8: Joint meeting of SD and WY GLCI and Society for Range Management, Hot Springs, SD. For more information, E-mail Stanley boltz@sd.usda.gov

Oct. 7-8: “Ranch Management: Innovation and Adaptation” is the focus of the King Ranch Institute symposium at the Texas A&M University-Kingsville campus. For more info, visit www.tamu.edu/aghs/keirn/symposium.htm or e-mail keirn@tamu.edu

Nov. 15-16: “Strategies for Sustainability” is the theme 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.

For other grazing events visit www.glci.org and click on Upcoming Events.
California Ranches Recognized For Conservation Efforts

Two California ranches have recently been spotlighted for their impressive conservation accomplishments. Both Yolo Land and Cattle Co., Esparto, CA, and the Work Family Ranch, San Miguel, CA, hosted summer tours to share their stewardship practices with others.

“These ranches are successful examples of combining partnerships, conservation, and agrotourism with traditional livestock operations,” says Meg Bishop, who serves as GLCI Coordinator for the Western States. Bishop points out that diversification and new partnership efforts like these two ranches have initiated will likely become more commonplace, especially in states like California, as there are more competing interests for natural resources.

Yolo Land and Cattle

Yolo Land and Cattle is a diverse operation that has been owned by the Hank Stone family since 1976. Today his sons Scott and Casey manage the operation that includes raising more than 500 black Angus, as well as agrotourism projects such as hosting everything from corporate events to weddings, and even selling ag products online. The Stones also farm near Dixon, CA where they run an agricultural real estate business and maintain the wastewater program for the local Campbell’s Soup cannery.

Since the mid-1990s the Stones have worked with several conservation programs to restore 10,000 acres of rangeland in the oak woodland foothills.

NRCS Chief Bruce Knight attended the tour at the ranch in June and said he was impressed by the management of the land - how the Stones move their cattle, use a variety of watering systems and maintain miles of extra fencing to promote conservation on their property. “It’s good for conservation, it’s good for the cattle, it’s good for the wildlife,” Knight said.

The Stones have partnered with numerous private and public entities in their conservation work, something Knight said is going to be more important in the future. “It’s a good example of an explosion I think you see

livestock and wildlife. For many of the projects, they used cost-share funds from state game and fish and NRCS Farm Bill programs. Today, the ranch is a year-round grazing operation with no supplementation to the 200 mother cows and 200 stockers.

They’ve also diversified into value-added entities including fee hunting, and the Works offer a Farm Stay program on their ranch, which allows up to 15 guests to stay on the ranch, hold retreats, find solitude and/or learn about the farm.

Not only does this provide added income to the farm, but it has an educational value too. “The education goes both ways. Most people we have stay are urban folks and it is really interesting for us to hear what their concerns are. The ag industry needs to do more of that: sit down and spend time with consumers,” George says.

He adds that he is optimistic about the future, “Opportunities are there for the future of agriculture. It may be different than the production ag we’ve known and more geared toward wildlife and tourism, but those are viable ag income opportunities as well.”

The tour of the Work Family Ranch was the first in a series of conservation workshops that the NCBA and NRCS will be co-hosting across the country highlighting NCBA Stewardship Award winners. For details on other upcoming tours contact NCBA’s Megan Tipton at mtipton@beef.org.

Work Family Ranch

Located in the rolling hills of Central California, the Work Family Ranch was homesteaded in the late 1890s, and today is a successful fourth generation cow-calf and stocker operation spanning 12,000 acres.

Owners Elaine and George Work, with their son Ben and his wife Kelly, were recognized for their conservation-minded efforts on the ranch by being named the 2004 National Environmental Stewardship Award winners. The annual award is sponsored by Dow AgroSciences and the NRCS.

The Works began implementing conservation efforts on their 12,000-acre operation in the mid-80s, including no-till farming and establishing pastures with perennial grass stands for grazing and wildlife habitat. They also implemented a planned grazing system, which included cross-fencing to create more than 60 pastures as well as developing watering sites for

Stewardship Ranches Named

Seven regional winners in the 14th annual Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) have been announced. An overall honoree will be named at the Cattle Industry Annual Convention in February 2005 in San Antonio, TX.

The regional honorees include:

Region 1: McElhaney Stock Farm, Hookstown, PA;
Region 2: Williamson Cattle Co., Okeechobee, FL;
Region 3: White Family Farms, Estherville, IA;
Region 4: Chain Land and Cattle Co., Canton, OK;
Region 5: Rutherford Ranch, Malta, MT;
Region 6: DC Cattle Co., Globe, AZ; and
Region 7: Gerald Roise Ranch, Powers Lake, ND

GLCi News
On June 15, 2004, GLCI and the entire ag industry lost a great leader when Richard Kjerstad passed away after a long battle with lung cancer. Kjerstad ran a diversified crop, ranch and feedlot operation with his family near Wall, SD and was described by many as "a true gentleman and steward of the land." He served on the National GLCI Steering Committee for several years and was active in the state and national leadership of the American Farm Bureau Federation. He will be sorely missed, and our thoughts and prayers go out to his family and wife Patty.

A memorial has been set up in Kjerstad’s honor. Contributions can be sent to:
The Richard Kjerstad Memorial Fund
c/o 1ST Western Bank
P.O. Box 402
Wall, SD 57790
Phone: 605-279-2141

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

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

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