

Grassland Gleanings

*What do good grazing managers know that you don't?
Here, they share some of their insights.*

by *Kindra Gordon*

Finding lower cost, more efficient ways to operate is a mindset that has come back in vogue during the last decade of higher costs in today's 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.

Neal Dennis, a commercial beef producer and custom grazer from Wawota, Saskatchewan, learned the lesson of being a low-cost operator during the economic struggles of the '80s. He tells 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 '80s and '90s 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 its 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.

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 are 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, its future growth will be reduced or the plant may die."

Dennis admits to learning this lesson the hard way. He says in the late '80s 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 receives



only 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."

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 is used when

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.

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 something isn't right and a grazing management change is needed instead.

Consider 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.

To stretch grazing 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 across the Great Plains.

But which species is worth the investment? Kansas research, testing persistence and productivity of 10 different varieties, indicates 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.

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 in recent years, Mother Nature dealt him just the opposite — destructive flooding.

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 stocking rate. "I stock my range with 30% of disposable cattle (stockers)," the longtime rancher says.

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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.

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. **HW**

KRI working to help others hone range skills

The next generation of ranchers can gain hands-on experiences through the Ranch and Range Management Internship Program with the Kansas Ranch Institute (KRI). Mentors will work one-on-one with interns to pass on the adaptive managerial skills required to create sustainable ranches well into the 21st century.

KRI has placements available with ranch mentors whose areas of expertise include grazing systems, ecological monitoring, wildlife enhancement, alternative forages, drought mitigation, ranch business modeling, prescribed burning and water management, to name a few.

Selected students will experience working with cow-calf, stocker or bison operations that range in size from a few hundred acres to more than 40,000 acres. In addition, interns will have the opportunity to learn the dynamics of various grasslands such as the Flint Hills, the Gyp Hills, the Osage Cuestas, and the Smoky Hills of Kansas, the Nebraska Sand Hills, and the Loess region of northwest Missouri.

This internship program is designed to expand the formal classroom and foster lifelong learning. In doing so, interns are expected to participate in several enrichment activities throughout the summer that complement what is being learned on the ranch.

To learn more about the internships offered and KRI, visit ksranchinstitute.org/internship/. **HW**

