

Grazing management mentors:

Networks for Sharing

Story & photos by Troy Smith

A dictionary definition equates a mentor to a trusted counselor, a tutor or a coach. Bismarck, N.D., rancher Gabe Brown prefers to think of his role as grazing and ranch management mentor as that of a friend who will share his experience. Some weeks, Brown may receive two or three phone calls — occasionally from “friends” he’s never met — seeking the benefit of his experience.

“Sometimes,” Brown says, “the best thing you can do is help them avoid the mistakes you’ve already made.”

Brown was instrumental in establishing a mentoring network that now consists of 20 grazing land managers located across the state. For the most part, they are full-time

farmers and ranchers with knowledge born of mistakes and successes. The mentoring network is a spin-off project of the North Dakota Private Grazing Lands Coalition.

More than 30 similar state coalitions have been organized, prompted by the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI).

That national effort was launched in 1991 by a consortium of national livestock, soil and range management organizations.

Member organizations feared federal farm policy was directing more attention toward conservation programs for erodible cropland, while reducing support for conservation planning on grazing land. The result was a reduction in Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) personnel

with expertise in grazing land management. The GLCI’s purpose was to call attention to the importance of grazing lands and advocate more technical assistance to grazing land managers.

Extending expertise

At the state level, grazing lands coalitions have promoted cooperation among landowners, government agencies, conservation and wildlife groups, and livestock organizations. They host conferences, workshops, tours and demonstrations to promote management practices that further goals for ranch profitability, resource conservation and environmental quality. State coalitions also strive to educate landowners regarding the availability of technical assistance and government cost-share programs for implementing grazing management, fencing and livestock watering systems that complement common goals.

“During our workshops and tours, we shared our experiences with one

another,” Brown says about the North Dakota Private Grazing Lands Coalition. “But, we knew there was a much larger audience than we were reaching through those meetings. And, some people are hesitant to contact the NRCS or other government agency personnel. So, we formed the mentoring network and published the names of grazing managers that were willing to work one-on-one with other producers.”

Each of the volunteer mentors possesses expertise in one or more grazing or ranch management areas. Brown is most often tapped for advice related to development of planned grazing systems. He counsels producers trying to move away from season-long grazing, where a group of cattle remains in the same pasture throughout the grazing season.

Brown helps them design and implement grazing systems consisting of multiple pastures through which cattle are moved in a planned rotation, with the rotation sequence changed during each subsequent year. It requires more management to monitor forage growth and removal and then move cattle at appropriate times. Benefits can include an extended grazing season and less dependence on harvested feeds, as well as improved range and pasture condition for increased production and greater drought tolerance.

Mentors also offer advice on the economics of grazing management and the development of water sources and fencing needed for practical application of alternative grazing systems. Other mentoring topics include labor management, livestock handling, and plant and animal pest control, as well as development of wildlife habitat and hunting enterprises.

Spreading success

Taking their cue from North Dakota, other states are adopting the mentoring concept. The Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition (NGLC) has developed a network that currently includes 10 owners or managers of operations based on grazed forages. Among them is project leader Lynn Myers, who, along with his wife, Marlene, ranches near Wellen, Neb. Myers says he and some of the other mentors are “a little long in the tooth,” but with that comes valuable experience.



► “There’s a lot to be learned from trials and triumphs of producers with experience in managing for profitability and sustainability,” says Lynn Myers, project leader for the mentor program developed by the NGLC.

“I was lucky enough to have mentors like my father-in-law (the late Ralph Tippetts) and [University of Nebraska Range Ecologist] Pat Reece,” Myers says. “I’d like to see others benefit from what I’ve learned from them, plus 30 years of trying to make our ranch sustainable. There’s a lot to be learned from trials and triumphs of producers with experience in managing for profitability and sustainability.”

Over the years, Myers has crossfenced to create more and smaller pastures, and laid miles of pipe for livestock watering sites to develop a deferred rotational grazing system. He continuously fine-tunes his grazing plan so no pasture is grazed during the same time frame in consecutive years. And, each pasture is deferred — not grazed until after the plant growing season — once every three years. Development of watering sites has promoted better grazing distribution of cattle.

The results include increased vigor among desirable grasses and a decline in undesirable plant species. The good grasses have deeper roots, making them more drought-tolerant. And, the pounds of beef produced per acre have increased by more than 50%.

“Now, some of that is due to better [cattle] genetics,” Myers explains. “But, because we produce more and better forage, we’ve increased our carrying capacity.”

Myers currently mentors six producers on a fairly regular basis, including Lakeside-area rancher Melody Benjamin. Some of the most important things she has learned from Myers include the need to have a long-term goal for the operation and to take action to reach it. Her goal is to eventually turn the ranch over to her 24-year-old son.

“Realistically, a 200-cow outfit is not going to be big enough for him to make a good living,” Benjamin states. “But, I hoped to increase production through better management and increased efficiency. And, if we keep the ranch debt-free, it could serve as collateral if he chooses to expand some day.”

With a little coaching by Myers, Benjamin devised a plan for the fencing of more and smaller pastures, and separation of upland range from meadows that need to be managed differently. She sought and received government cost-share assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Application of a deferred rotational grazing system will allow Benjamin to run a few yearlings in addition to the existing cow herd. The plan also allows more range to be available for winter grazing. That means more of her hay production can be sold as a cash crop. Believing there will be opportunities to earn additional income from ecotourism, Benjamin also has fenced

off an area that includes a small lake, devoting it to wildlife habitat.

Nurturing neighbors

Myers also mentors one of his nearby neighbors, Steve Thomason. After years of running his own Colorado-based consulting company, Thomason and his family purchased a ranch in western Nebraska. While he was farm-raised, Thomason readily admits that his background did not prepare him for ranching in the Sandhills.

“I attended the University of Nebraska Ranch Practicum and learned a lot about grazing management principles,” Thomason notes, “but Lynn has helped me to apply them. I’ve asked a lot of dumb questions, but he says the only dumb question is one that goes unasked.”

Thomason says he’s learning how to look into the range, instead of across the range. He’s seeing how the types of plants that dominate a pasture offer clues to how it was managed or mismanaged in the past, and how it should be managed to improve range health and increase production. He’s also learned that it’s possible to understock a pasture and overgraze it at the same time.

“It’s been a real help to be able to go to Lynn’s place and have him physically show me what he is doing,” Thomason adds. “He’s also urged me to attend educational meetings and seminars, and introduced me to other producers with a wealth of experience. He reminds me that I have to make my own decisions for my ranch, but he’s helped me find the tools I need to do it.”

Myers says Thomason and other producers he advises often ask questions



► One of Myers’ protégés, Steve Thomason, says that through the mentor program he is learning how to apply grazing principles — learning to look into the range instead of across it.

that make him pause and rethink his own management strategies. During the mentoring process, the participants’ roles are sometimes reversed.

“It’s all about sharing ideas, and it goes both ways,” Myers affirms. “I think a lot of people find it hard to go to the NRCS or Extension specialists for help. But, they might talk to another producer that’s putting different range management concepts into practice. It’s more like talking across the fence with a good neighbor. That’s what we’re doing, really — just neighboring.”



