

Grassland Gleanings

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 with 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 Aug. 10-11 in Kearney, Neb.

Neil 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," he says. But difficult financial times during the 1980s and 1990s 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.

No. 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.

"When I leave a paddock, I want every square inch to have a footprint. Then I allow adequate recovery time for that area," he says, reporting 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 1980s 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.

"It's not about how much rain you get, it's how much you hold in the soil," he says.

No. 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

In praise of grassland

Grassland: Quietness and Strength for a New American Agriculture, a new book published by the American Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America and Soil Science Society of America, takes a look at the many functions of grassland today and examines the benefits grass-based agriculture can provide when grass is treated as an essential resource. It has three main sections:

- ▶ "Past Is Prologue" tracks the history of grassland farming, emphasizing some of the philosophical arguments that advocate for grasslands as a vital component of an evolving American society.
- ▶ "The Present: Transitions Over 60 Years" aims to give readers the foundation needed to move into the future, including updated information on cropping systems that include perennial grasses and legumes.

- ▶ "The Forward Look: Opportunities and Challenges" looks at the role of grass-based agriculture in maintaining the stability of rural communities, including the human health benefits when grasses and legumes are made a primary resource in the food chain.

The book was edited by Walter Wedin, emeritus professor of agronomy at Iowa State University (ISU), and Steven Fales, ISU agronomist. Wendell Berry, a farmer and author of more than 40 books and essays about culture and agriculture, wrote a forward that stresses the importance of properly educating farmers about the land and the roles of grasslands.

The book can be purchased online for \$80 (Item No. B40722 at www.societystore.org), by phone at 608-268-4960, or by e-mail to books@agronomy.org.

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.

No. 3: Weeds are a wake-up call.

"Weeds are a symptom, not a problem," Dennis says. "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.

No. 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 Harmony, 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.

Harmony 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 10 different varieties, Harmony reports that Western wheatgrass (Barton and Flintock varieties) and Russian wild rye (Bozoisky) are more tolerant of heat and drought than other perennial cool-season grasses tested.

No. 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 stocking rate.

"I stock my range with 30% of disposable cattle by weight," the longtime rancher says.

No. 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.

"Go work someplace else for a while

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or go get an MBA (master's of business administration)," he says. "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 Aug. 9-10, 2011, in Kearney, Neb.*