

God's caretakers

It was also noted at the Fifth National Conference on Grazing Lands that many of the speakers mentioned God in their presentations, as well as their desire to care for the land, livestock and people He has created. At how many conferences do you hear that sentiment?

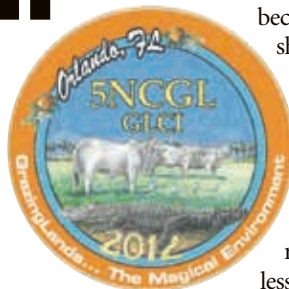
University of Kentucky's Garry Lacefield shared a poignant luncheon keynote and concluded with a YouTube video of Paul Harvey's "So God Made A Farmer." It's definitely worth viewing at www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3GtXAqhSgo.



8 Lessons Gleaned From Graziers

Water management and soil health among their top concerns.

Commentary by Kindra Gordon, field editor



More than 400 grazing enthusiasts from across the United States gathered in Orlando, Fla., Dec. 9-12 for the Fifth National Conference on Grazing Lands (5NCGL), and I was fortunate enough to be among them.

This conference — which is convened every three years — is one of my favorites because everyone is so enthusiastic about sharing the grazing experiences on their ranch, including the mistakes from which they've learned. A commonality among the ranchers was rotational grazing. Most have 20- to 30-acre paddocks and move their cattle every three to five days. Their management success goes beyond rotational grazing. Following are some lessons I gleaned from the conference.



1. Water is the big issue. Many of the ranchers who shared their grazing goals talked about managing for vegetative cover to enhance water infiltration — as Gene Goven of Turtle Lake, N.D., put it, “capturing every raindrop where it falls.”

Land managers must come to realize this is as important in a dry year as it is in a wet year. As an example, Lowry, S.D., rancher Lyle Perman talked about the massive flooding the Dakotas have seen in the past five years and questioned if it is because we’ve gotten more precipitation than ever before in history, or if the explanation is more likely tied to the amount of tillage that is occurring and fewer grasslands to help capture the rainfall and minimize runoff?

Perman shared some interesting cowboy

math with regard to water. He noted that on 5,000 acres, if he gets 9.61 inches of rain from March to November, and there are 27,154 gallons in an acre inch, that adds up to 1.3 billion gallons of water that he manages on his ranch ($27,154 \times 9.61 \times 5,000 = 1.3$ billion). In a wet year, that can increase to as much as 3 billion gallons.

Did you ever stop to consider that you are a steward of so much water? What are you doing to capture every raindrop?

2. Focus on soil health. Along with managing the water, soil was also a major topic among these grazing managers, so much so that at times I felt like I was at an agronomy conference.

“Soil health is priceless,” said rancher Ken Miller of Fort Rice, N.D.

Miller does a variation of mob grazing and bale grazing and is focused on getting vegetative litter on the ground. He notes that litter helps capture moisture — and keeps the soil cooler so that plants are more productive.

“You want to leave residue after grazing,” he says. “When I look down, I don’t want to see any soil.”

3. Cover crops are king – for pasture, too. Sure, cover crops are catching on in crop aftermath, but these guys are seeding it into pastures to rejuvenate them as well. Miller said he has had great success in grazing a cool-season pasture of mostly smooth brome in the spring, burning it down chemically and then seeding a “cocktail mix” of warm-season plants into it for winter grazing. The mix of deep-rooted plants and legumes (sunflowers, radishes, turnips, etc.) is helping build that soil health, cattle love to graze it, and Miller has provided habitat for wildlife as well.

Jerry Doan, a rancher from McKenzie, N.D., emphasized that with cover crops he has been able to successfully winter-graze until January — and even March in a light-snowfall year. This has saved his ranch as much as \$50,000 in feed costs.

“That’s a family income,” he said. “That’s helping my two sons come back to the ranch.”

4. May/June calving is key. More than one producer from Montana and the Dakotas mentioned that their switch from February/March calving to May/June was the “smartest thing they ever did.” Many of them admitted it took a few years to finally make the move, but once they did, they’ve never looked back.

“The number one thing we’ve done for profitability was get away from spring calving,” said North Dakota’s Doan.

5. Dealing with drought. We’ve all

heard before that it’s important to have a drought plan in place and be ready to act when the rain doesn’t come. One comment that University of Kentucky forage specialist and professor Garry Lacefield suggested was to have a “sacrifice” pasture. Rather than overgraze several — or all — of your pastures during drought. Select one pasture that you are willing to put your cattle on and give them supplemental feed.

Of course, destocking should still be considered, as should the cost of the supplemental feed, but Lacefield pointed out that this way your other pastures will be able to rebound faster when the rain does come.

6. Think “out of the box.” A common phrase said by many of the speakers was “my neighbors think I’m nuts.” These innovative thinkers never seemed deterred; they relish their role as problem-solvers, and their families and their farm/ranch operations are better for it. Besides, their neighbors were still back home, while they were sharing their stories in Florida!

7. Go custom. A common theme among many of the speakers was custom-grazing — both stockers and cow-calf pairs. Several speakers still owned a core herd of their own, but the custom-grazing option allows them the flexibility to stock based on the grazing conditions for that year — rather than find themselves with a large herd they own, and not enough forage for grazing during a dry year (or too much forage to graze in a wet year).

8. Nature tourism has arrived. Another idea that was offered was tapping nature tourism as a source of extra revenue. Bruce Hoffman, a rancher and investment broker from Texas, shared an interesting statistic: Texas Parks & Wildlife has not seen an increase in the sale of hunting licenses over the last 15 years — at a time when the population is still growing. So, while hunting is hitting a plateau, people still want to get out into nature and are willing to pay for it. That provides an opportunity for nature tourism. For example, bird and wildlife watching and nature photography are booming.

Hoffman talked about adding nature tourism as a viable entity to just about any ranch that is tolerant of visitors, of course. He noted that in Texas, some ranchers are fetching as much as \$250 per day per person to allow them to get onto private lands and take wildlife and wildflower photos.



Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is an Angus Journal field editor and cattlemaster near Whitewood, S.D.*