



BY TRIAL & ERROR

A willingness to try new conservation ideas helps this North Dakota multi-generation operation weather drought, extend grazing and enjoy life.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

When asked his best grazing advice for other producers, Kerry Dockter says, “Don’t be scared to try. A lot of times trial and error is what gives you the best answer.”

During the past five decades, some of Kerry and wife Brenda’s learn-as-they-go practices have included rotational grazing, water developments, no-till farming, double-cropping, and even prescribed burning. With some fine-tuning, these conservation efforts have helped the Dockter family’s native grasslands near Denhoff, N.D., remain productive and their commercial Angus herd thrive.

“It’s all a system, and each year

depends on Mother Nature,” Dockter says.

He points to summer 2021 as an example, noting that while summer was primarily a drought, fall rains spurred green-up of forages.

“This allowed us to have extended fall grazing, and it was after Thanksgiving when we had to

start feeding,” he shares. Without some of their rotational pastures and crop aftermath to graze, Dockter adds, they would have been feeding in October.

Generation to generation

Dockter credits his dad for instilling in him a conservation ethic.

“When I was in high school [in the late 1960s], Dad served on the county conservation board along

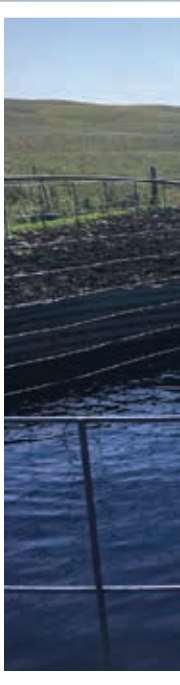
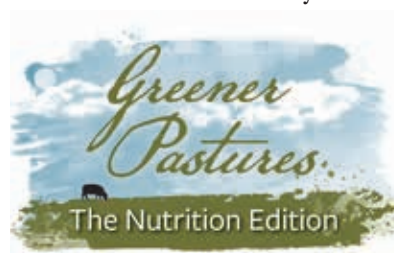
with a good family friend. I would listen to their conversations,” he says. “Looking back now, I

realize my dad was always willing to try new things for our ranch.”

Dockter recalls his dad being devoted to expanding watering sources on the range by digging dugouts and drilling a well in the later 1970s. The senior Dockter was also passionate about planting shelterbelts.

“Looking back, we should have planted more trees,” Dockter says.

After attending college, he came home in 1973 to ranch with his parents, Theo and Norma. The mantra of applying new practices on the ranch continued. As an example, upon marrying Brenda, who had grown up on an Angus operation, Kerry and his dad transitioned from Hereford and dairy cows to a commercial Angus herd.



In 2015 another transition occurred. Daughter Kristi and her husband, Kyle Jensen, returned to the ranch, thereby establishing the Dockter-Jensen Ranch moniker.

“To have the next generation interested in coming back, that’s what you work your whole life for,” says Dockter.

With the addition to the family operation, Dockter works hard to be as open-minded and willing to adapt to new ideas as his father was.

“I remind myself that the way I have done things is not necessarily the right way,” he says. “Stopping and listening to different ideas is very rewarding, and sometimes I walk away from conversations thinking: ‘Why didn’t I think of that?’”

First came cross-fencing

Of the practices most important to their ranch success, Dockter points to cross-fencing pastures. They started the effort in the late 1980s while dealing with drought on the ranch.

“We realized if you can be rotating your cattle on pastures, rather than using season-long grazing, then you can give the pastures some rest, and you are always going to get some forage regrowth,” Dockter says.



Today, they have seven pastures through which they rotate their herd. Even in drought they find pastures that were grazed early and rested can be grazed again in late summer or fall. Looking ahead, they say they hope to cross-fence and make two more pastures to add to their rotation.

Next came water sources

After cross-fencing and rotational grazing, the Dockters realized reliable water sources were next on their list of needs.

Left: Kerry and Brenda Dockter have learned by experience, using practices including rotational grazing, water developments, no-till farming, double-cropping and prescribed burning.

Below: In 2015 daughter Kristi and her husband, Kyle Jensen, returned to the ranch, thereby establishing the Dockter-Jensen Ranch moniker.



“To have the next generation interested in coming back, that’s what you work your whole life for.” — *Kerry Dockter*

The dugouts they relied on often dried up in drought years, or offered poor-quality water.

The addition of a well 540 feet deep to access good-quality water was a starting point. They put it in the center of a 640-acre pasture that was cross-fenced into four smaller pastures and powered by a windmill because there were no

power sources nearby.

“We saw in a hurry how cattle walk by dugouts to get fresh water,” he tells.

Over time, the windmill required a lot of maintenance, so the

Dockters switched to a propane-generated pump on the well.

“It improved how the well worked, but it wasn’t foolproof,” says Dockter.

He switched to a solar-powered pump, which he says, “keeps up” and pumps from dawn until dark.

More recently, Dockter

Continued on page 16



Left: Dockter switched to a solar-powered pump, which he says “keeps up” and pumps from dawn until dark.

Above: By working with NRCS, they found a more economical solution than drilling another well. They added a 1-mile stretch of shallow pipeline with a gravity-fed pressure system and 3,200-gallon storage tank.

considered drilling another well to help bring fresh water to more of his pastures. However, by working with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) personnel, they found a more economical solution. They added a 1-mile stretch of shallow pipeline with a gravity-fed pressure system and 3,200-gallon storage tank.

“We put in an overhead storage tank so that when the sun was shining and the solar system was working, and the first 22-foot water tank was full, it would push water through a pressure system to the next overhead tank and keep that tank full,” Dockter explains.

The pipeline and water storage system work so well, they hope to expand to another mile of underground pipeline with another storage tank to provide fresh water to another two pastures.

While they still use some dugouts for water, they monitor the quality of those sources and water test them in drought years.

Utilizing cropland

While Dockter-Jensen Ranch raises hay and other feedstocks for winter feed for their cow herd, they have also dabbled in cover crops to extend their forage supplies and grazing opportunities.

For example, they follow corn and oats by planting a winter-forage, cover-crop mixture into the harvested stubble in the fall. Typically winter triticale or winter rye is mixed with a cover crop mix.

“We no-till plant winter triticale or winter rye in September, which germinates and comes up later in the fall,” Dockter explains. “It will then go dormant during winter and come up early in the spring. By mid-June, the crop can be hayed.”

Manure is spread on that field, and in early July, they will plant a mixture of millet and sudangrass.

“This gives us another forage crop,” he says. “The following year, we will plant oats mixed with millet to use for feed.”

Dockter likes using different



Its commitment to conservation has earned the Dockter-Jensen Ranch recognition as the 2020 North Dakota Leopold Conservation Award winner.

crops and rotations to benefit soil health, as well as boost the feed nutritive value for their cattle herd.

Bottom-line benefits

All total, the Dockters have focused on continual improvement for their ranch so it is sustainable for the next generation. Their efforts have allowed them to increase stocking rates of their herd, and have benefited the land, as well.

“We’re seeing soil health benefits,” Dockter notes, “and our water infiltration has improved.”

Dockter credits his “willingness

to keep learning” for helping him find what worked for his ranch. He hopes to pass that mindset to his daughter and son-in-law and other producers.

“You’ve got to try things and be somewhat patient,” he says. “Do what is feasible and cost-effective. Concentrate your efforts on the things that are working.”

He emphasizes, “You can always learn something.”

Editor’s note: Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.

More about North Dakota’s Dockter-Jensen Ranch

The Dockter and Jensen families operate a commercial Angus herd that calves from March through early May, with a second smaller herd of commercial Angus cows that calve from late August through early October. Kerry Dockter likes the extra marketing options the fall-born calves offer.

With their ranch located amidst the mixed-grass prairie of the Missouri Coteau, they are in the heart of land known for waterfowl and grassland bird production. They have collaborated with North Dakota State University and other researchers to demonstrate the compatibility of cattle grazing with waterfowl and grassland-nesting birds, and have adjusted haying and grazing times of certain land parcels to accommodate nesting. Additionally, working with the Nature Conservancy, the Dockter family has utilized some prescribed burns on their land to enhance wildlife and pollinator habitat.

The commitment to conservation by the Dockter-Jensen Ranch earned them recognition as the North Dakota Leopold Conservation Award winner in 2020.