

# THE GRAZING ADVANTAGE

## Grazing key to ag's sustainability story.

by Troy Smith, field editor

It's been said graziers have an advantage. In the ongoing discussion about the sustainability of agriculture and beef production in particular, the general public may look most favorably upon production systems based on grazed forages. A lot of people like the idea of content cattle grazing verdant valleys, mountain meadows or vast prairie pastures. They want to like the overseers of such idyllic pastoral scenes.

Whether they call themselves ranchers, grass farmers or something else, National Grazing Lands Coalition Board Chairman Chad Ellis thinks most graziers have good stories to tell. Ellis has heard plenty while holding positions with USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Noble Research Institute and as the current CEO of the Texas Agricultural Land Trust.

"There are so many positives associated with forage-based production systems," Ellis says. "It's clean production. Grazing operations maintain open space, and well-managed grazing improves habitat for wildlife."

Of course, few among the general public understand what it takes to manage a grazing operation or any ag enterprise. Ellis thinks few producers fully recognize the extent to which urban consumers are disconnected from agriculture.

"Even in small towns, many people don't really understand where food and other products come from. They may not know where their water comes from, so they don't understand how management of private working lands, and especially grasslands, can

affect water quality," Ellis says.

If people don't know how grasslands provide for the rainwater recharge of underground aquifers or how grasslands filter runoff flowing to rivers and lakes, they probably are unaware of other eco-services provided by grasslands, such as soil conservation, carbon sequestration and climate mitigation.

The same people don't realize how sustaining healthy resources capable of providing for these services, as well as optimal livestock production, requires good grazing management. Ellis agrees, but he notes how excellent grazing managers plan for more than sustainability.

"I think some (grazing managers) dislike that word. To them, managing for sustainability means they're trying to maintain the ability to just continue doing what they've been doing. They want more than that," Ellis explains. "Maybe that's why some people use the term 'regenerative' to describe management practices aimed at doing more. They plan to keep getting better."

### Setting the example

Trevor Toland planned to improve his land located along the East Fork of the La Moine River, near Macomb, Ill. The region is known for corn and soybean production, but Toland's River Oak Ranch includes floodplain and rough uplands — land considered marginal for production of row crops.

"A lot of people would call it junk land,"

Toland says, acknowledging its light, erodible soils.

Twenty-five years ago, Toland established a management-intensive grazing (MiG) system, providing replacement heifer development for area cattlemen. Over time, the system has been developed to include 47 paddocks rotationally grazed for short periods of time, followed by long periods of rest.

"We use high stock density and rotate often,

*"I'm proud to show what we're doing to anybody, anytime."*

— Trevor Toland

usually after one, two or three days of grazing. We never graze any paddock for more than five days, always leaving 4 to 5 inches of grass behind. And every paddock gets 40 to 50 days of rest before it's grazed again," Toland explains, noting how some regrowth is stockpiled for use after the growing season.

Reed canary grass dominates the lowlands, while upland areas support a fescue-clover mix. All respond favorably to Toland's management, without use of commercial fertilizers. Healthy forages outcompete most weedy plants, eliminating the need for herbicides.

Toland was a five-year participant in the Illinois Pasture Project, which facilitated the measuring of management effects on soil health, including increased organic matter,

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# 7 KEY ELEMENTS TO A GRAZING PLAN

Illinois' Trevor Toland and Texas rancher Rooter Brite agree managing a sustainable grazing operation requires a plan, but managers must also plan to be flexible.

As Toland puts it, "You plan the big picture, but you've still got to fly by the seat of your pants. You have to adjust to changing conditions; be adaptable."

Brite sees a grazing plan as a rough draft or guide that prompts a

manager to think, evaluate what's happening on the land and respond appropriately.

There must be a starting place, though, and Noble Research Institute consultant Steven Smith says a grazing plan is a tool for organizing all available resources. He says a grazing plan is the starting place from which a manager can chart a course toward desired outcomes. With that in mind, a plan should include seven key elements.

## 1) SET GOALS.

"Setting goals is important because they define the outcomes you're striving for," Smith explains.

It might be extending the grazing season, reducing or eliminating reliance on harvested feedstuffs and assuring adequate body condition for grazing animals while conserving soil, water and wildlife resources. People tend to focus on production-related and economic goals, but lifestyle goals should be considered, too.

## 2) MAPS AND/OR AERIAL PHOTOS.

"I love maps," Smith says. "Maps and photos of your farm or ranch allow you to view the entire property and evaluate the terrain. Soil maps can give you insight about which areas are likely to support better forage production and which areas might need different management."

Sources for maps include the USDA's NRCS and Web Soil Survey. Online sources for aerial maps include Google Maps and Google Earth.

## 3) EVALUATION OF EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE.

When managers have maps in hand, Smith suggests they draw in all existing infrastructure, including water sources, pasture fencelines, roads and other structures.

"Knowing what you've got helps identify limiting factors and infrastructure development that could help improve utilization of the property," Smith says.

## 4) INVENTORY OF EXISTING FORAGE TYPES.

According to Smith, production capability and time of availability vary for different types of forage plants, whether they are native or introduced, warm-season or cool-season. Different forages may have to be managed differently.

## 5) INVENTORY OF GRAZEABLE ACRES.

Not all farm or ranch acreage may be producing grazeable forage, especially when brush and tree encroachment is problematic. Smith says a surprisingly large number of managers fail to account for

reductions in grazeable acreage due to woody encroachment.

"They still try to run the same number of cattle year after year, because that's how my Grandpa grazed there," he adds.

## 6) STOCKING RATE.

Inventories of forages present and total grazeable acres are steps to estimating forage available for grazing, which is then used to determine stocking rate. Smith says many producers don't know how to calculate stocking rates and instead use local rules of thumb to decide how many acres are required per animal. However, NRCS and university extension personnel can help producers learn to take field measurements for estimation of pounds of forage production per acre.

"The easiest way may be the grazing stick," Smith says, referring to a yardstick-type ruler used for measuring plant height and converting measurements into estimates of pasture yield in terms of pounds of forage dry matter per acre.

An appropriate stocking rate will optimize utilization of the available forage, according to the manager's goals for cattle performance, wildlife benefit and conservation of the grazing resource.

## 7) CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE.

According to Smith, producers transitioning from more traditional grazing systems to systems involving multi-paddock rotations and high stocking densities often find additional infrastructure development is warranted. Many producers make use of inexpensive temporary fencing, but permanent fences and additional watering sources make economic sense when they further management goals.

The most important feature of a grazing plan is flexibility, Smith notes.

"It's a starting place — a way to get organized," he says, "but it's going to change as you go along. Every year is different. You have to be adaptable."

PHOTOS BY SHAUNA HERMEL



increased microbial activity and cooler soil temperatures. Toland says healthier soils translate to healthier, more resilient forages, especially during drought. River Oak Ranch is sufficiently drought-resistant to allow a consistent stocking rate to have been maintained for several years.

“We grow better and more forage, so the cattle perform better, too,” Toland says, explaining how yearling heifers arrive April 1, graze without supplementation through December and go home as bred replacements.

“We try to provide the best forage possible, and the cattle do well. It’s profitable for us, and I think we’re environmentally correct,” Toland adds. “I’m proud to show what we’re doing to anybody, anytime.”

### A learning process

Texas rancher James “Rooter” Brite says his family has been trying to improve their JA Ranch since 1929.

That’s when his grandfather founded the operation, piecing together tracts of native range and failed cotton farms that the former owners had lost to bankruptcy or foreclosure. Previously cultivated land was returned to grass. When Brite’s dad took over, he tried to continue improving the ranch through conservative management.

Brite favors a conservative approach, too, and models that for his own son, J.K. But their methods differ.

“I started rotational grazing in the ’70s, and I made a lot of mistakes,” Brite admits. “Fortunately, none were fatal, so I learned from them and kept going.”

Over the years, stock water development and crossfencing transformed the ranch’s original seven pastures into the current 54, averaging about 80 acres each. The ranch manages fall-calving cows, retaining the calves as stockers to sell off grass weighing 800-900 pounds (lb.). Managed in three or four groups, the cattle are moved frequently through planned rotations.

“When the grass is growing fast, we move faster — as frequently as every two days. And when the grass grows slow, we move slower,” Brite says, “but we always take less than half of



the available forage. Then every pasture gets a long period of rest. Some will get up to 200 days of rest.”

Along with planned grazing, Brite uses prescribed fire, mechanical means and judicious herbicide application to control invasive weeds and encroaching woody species, including mesquite, cedar and greenbrier. Managing for the health of native prairie grasses provides sufficient forage for cattle to graze year-round with seasonal protein supplementation. They keep an emergency supply of hay on hand, but only feed it on rare occasions when the range is covered up with snow.

Brite records precipitation and uses range transect measurements to estimate annual forage production across the ranch. Through routine range monitoring, Brite knows production improved from 1,500-2,000 lb. of dry matter per acre when monitoring began to the 4,000 lb. per acre produced during each of the last several years.

He recommends using transects or some type of range and pasture monitoring method to reveal trends in forage production and

relationships between weather and the health of the range.

“Monitoring lets you see the value of what you’re doing and lends confidence to your decision-making,” Brite says.

“Monitoring lets you see the value of what you’re doing.”

— James “Rooter” Brite

Ellis agrees, urging all cattlemen to evaluate their operation’s sustainability, suggesting they consider using the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) Self-Assessment Tool.

The NRCS can help graziers choose a method for evaluating grazing resources, and soil testing will tell what’s going on within the sod.

“You establish a baseline and then measure the impacts of your management over time,” Ellis says, noting how strengths and weaknesses are revealed. “It shows how you’re becoming more sustainable and how you can get even better.”

Editor’s note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.

