

# Managing Forage Resources

Tips to help make the most of rangeland resources.

by Lindsey Sawin, editorial intern

‘**W**hat other business model do we have where your employees work for free; they get up every morning before daylight and go to work; they’re usually working until about dark; your raw materials replace themselves with nothing but rain and sunshine; and your employees, when they are about ready to retire, will provide their replacement for free?’

Tim Steffens, West Texas A&M University (WTAMU) associate professor and extension rangeland resource management specialist posed that question while talking about the business of grazing livestock.

Spending most of his life in drier parts of the United States, Steffens is no stranger to managing rangeland in unpredictable environments and helping ranchers across the country do the same.

## Make the most of a rain

Available rangeland resources depend on several factors. Some vary across different regions of the United States, but one thing always remains the same: You need rain to grow forage.

“You can’t affect how much rain you get, but you can affect how much good you get out of a rain,” Steffens explains.

Promoting cover is a vital part of making the most of moisture, he says. Cover will help rain seep into the ground in a productive way, rather than destroying the soil structure on bare ground.

Good cover on grazing land minimizes evaporative losses. Steffens also notes that well-managed perennial plants will respond quickly after a rain.

“They don’t have to sprout and then make a seedling, and then get big enough to graze,” says Steffens. “They come back from the crown, and they grow.”

Plant diversity — including both warm- and cool-season varieties — adds to range health, Steffens says.

“If all you have is one kind of plant, if rain comes when that’s ready to respond, it’s great. If it comes on one end or the other of the growing season, and that’s not when it’s ready to grow, that did you very little good,” he says.

## Weeds are not all bad

Some weeds may occur during a drought,

even with good management, explains Steffens.

“A lot of times, those weeds are there because they are tying up nutrients so they don’t get away,” he says. “They’re there loosening up the soil, putting down a deeper taproot that is going to make water get into the ground better.”

Many times, producers will spray the weeds before they have had time to do the good that is possible, or after they have gone too far and have negatively affected the more desirable plants. Steffens says spraying too soon may stop the good they are doing for the soil, while spraying too late may waste money because they have already done any damage that might occur.

“There are times to go kill weeds,” he says. “But, you want to ask yourself, why do I have them? Can I do anything about that?”

Just killing the weeds and going back to regular management practices can result in those weeds, or something worse, coming in, he says. Figuring out why you have weeds will help you change your management plan to better address them and prevent them from coming back.

“Something is going to grow where





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## Sharing what he knows

Diverse real-world experience gives Tim Steffens a unique range-management perspective.

He managed ranches in dry parts of the country, and has worked with cattlemen from eastern Colorado to the most southern parts of Texas and many places in between.

Seeing more dry years than wet sparked a passion for good rangeland management, he says.

That's why he hosts grazing management schools

upon request with producers across the United States. To do a school, he simply needs a place to host the event and 15-30 people who want to learn. The prices and fees will be discussed from there.

Each event focuses on grazing and ranch management, with discussions on forage, animal, grazing and economic relationships, Steffens says.

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something can grow. The reason you have something growing there now is that's the best-adapted plant of all the ones that are available to grow in that spot right this minute," says Steffens.

He suggests determining the driving forces, changing them and then killing the weeds to allow the other, more suitable plants to grow.

### Just do it

The basis of every commercial cattle operation is converting natural resources to something people can eat, but the steps between determine overall success, says Steffens.

"You have to change sunlight and water to grass. Then you change grass to cattle. Then you change cattle to money," he says.

"Whichever one of those links is weakest, that is the one you have to work on."

Cattlemen are good at their jobs. They know how to raise cattle and improve their herd, Steffens says. Still, he encourages them to make certain they are getting the most out of their acreage.

Once the plan is set, Steffens says to get it rolling.

"There are lots of different strategies. You just have to figure out the one that is going to be the least painful, and then implement it," he says. "Don't talk about it. Don't say, 'I wonder what if.'"

The most successful grazing managers are those who have money in their pockets and grass in the pasture, says Steffens.

"You're managing a forage inventory, a cattle inventory and a money inventory," he says. "You can't have too much grass or too much money."

### Carrying capacity

Every pasture can handle a different number of cows at any given time. Knowing that number for each area you are grazing is important, says Steffens.

The carrying capacity in a year with good rainfall can look very different than in a drought year, making it vital to know what your grazing volume should be during each instance, he says.

"I've never seen anyone go broke being understocked," says Steffens.

He encourages producers to visualize their grazing acreage as if it were a hay barn.

"In a decent year, I am getting more hay,

and I am feeding hay, and it goes out and comes in and everything is still alright," he says. "We get into a drought, hay quits coming in, but you still are feeding some. I can feed a few cows for a long time, or I can feed a lot of cows for a short time."

He recommends producers look at the amount of equity they are losing by hanging on to cows when conditions aren't favorable to graze that many.

"You have less equity now to play with for a cushion, you start playing with feeding and that equity goes away, and now you basically don't own the cows anymore and you have to pay for them again," he says.

Drought years should offer producers the opportunity to make culling decisions that will reform their herd, Steffens says.

"Don't be afraid to sell a cow. Everybody has a bottom end of a herd," he says, encouraging producers to look at a drought as an opportunity to upgrade the herd.

"Don't spend a bunch of money on a cow. It is not a high-margin business." **ABB**

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Editor's note: A student at WTAMU, Lindsey Sawin was the 2022 *Angus Beef Bulletin* intern.