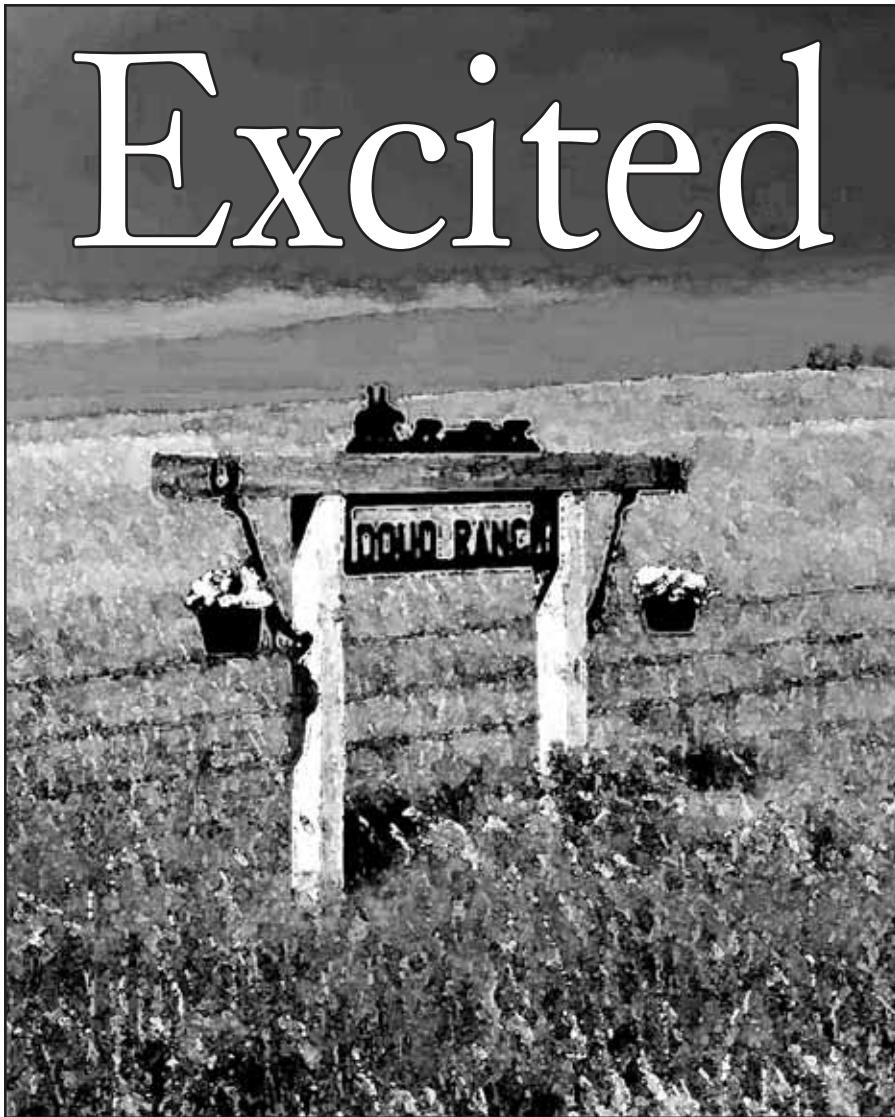


Excited

About Ranch



Rotational grazing and a switch to May-June calving have re-energized this South Dakota commercial Angus operation.

Story by
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“Haying all summer and feeding all winter,” is how Rick and Marlis Doud felt they were spending their time on their commercial cow-calf operation near Midland, S.D. The ranch encompasses 6,000 deeded acres and 2,500 leased acres on which the Douds graze nearly 400 commercial Angus and black baldie cow-calf pairs.

The Douds established their ranch in the early 1970s and operated it like many ranches in the region — calving in March and April and selling calves in early November.

But, by the late 90s, Rick and Marlis were frustrated. They were maintaining five different herds with season-long grazing from June 1 to Oct. 15 (four and a half months). Winter pastures were being grazed and supplemental hay fed for the remaining seven and a half months of the year. This cycle led to that feeling of putting up hay all summer and feeding it all winter.

Rick says he knew something had to change; rotational grazing was in the back of his mind. So in 1999, he attended the Ranching for Profit School to learn more about grazing management. Rick calls his first experience with the school an eye-opener. Eager to learn more, he repeated the Ranching for Profit School in 2000. By that time, he was ready to start experimenting with rotating two herds through three pastures each.

After seeing some benefits from running two herds each through a three-pasture rotation, the Douds were eager to try rotational grazing again in 2001. They worked with their local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to begin implementing some cross-fencing and install water pipelines and tanks, as well as design a grazing plan.

Despite the scant rain that summer, they pursued the rotational grazing, and noticed that every time they moved the herd, the cattle acted like it was lush, new regrowth — even though little regrowth was apparent to the naked eye.

The next leap

In 2002, the Douds made their biggest management leap by combining the two big herds into one and moving their calving date to May 12. Rick explains that they move all cows, including first-calf

heifers, to summer pasture after May 1 and start rotating the single herd through seven different pastures while calving. Their first rotation is anywhere from five to 10 days per pasture. The second rotation is from eight to 14 days, with most pastures getting a rest period from 30 to 90 days. Some of the pastures are only grazed a total of 13 days out of the year.

Breeding season has also been simplified. Rather than five herds, the Douds split the herd into a mature cow herd and first-calf heifers. Bulls are turned out with the females for 60 days, beginning the first week of August. With the large cow herd, Rick will use 10-12 Charolais bulls on his Angus cows, but he staggers the bull turnout into thirds over the course of a few weeks. Angus bulls that offer calving ease are used on first-calf heifers.

Rick says changing his thinking and management have been the best choices he's ever made for the ranch.

“I always thought if I stayed home and worked hard, I'd be successful, but that traditional route wasn't working. This has gotten me excited about ranching again. There's a great opportunity out there if we can get away from the old style of calving in February and March. It's time to change,” he says.

The Douds have seen abundant rewards from their improved grassland management and move to summer calving.

Even through severe drought from 2001-2008, they report improvement in the productivity and diversity of the grasses in the rotated pastures, which has increased carrying capacity. As a result, the Douds are considering expanding their herd numbers in the near future.

Additionally, Rick estimates feed costs on the ranch have been reduced by 60%-75%. While Doud still puts up some hay, he is grazing more of his hay land, and is able to primarily graze his livestock throughout the winter, except for the few occasions when the land is covered with too much snow.

The Douds say their cows are quieter and less stressed with the new system as well, which they say ultimately equates to less health management costs and more pounds of beef being produced from the land.

The improved rangeland management has also created the opportunity for the Douds to

Thinking Again

background half to one-third of their annual calf crop on the ranch. Calves are weaned and then put back on grass through the winter with only a little cake and hay supplement. They are typically sold the first Friday in June at the Fort Pierre Livestock Auction.

More quality time

The Douds note that their management changes have resulted in some returns that are difficult to assign a monetary value.

“It seems like before, when calving season rolled around everything was so tense,” Marlis sums up. “Now, by calving in May and June, the anxiety has been taken out of calving season. It’s a lot less work, and we are much more relaxed. We have more quality to our life.”

She adds, “When Rick’s thinking changed, and he decided he could step out of the box and away from doing things the way they have always been done, we went from just making it financially on the ranch to realizing we can get ahead. And that afforded us the opportunity to make some improvements on the land as well.”

Among those improvements are 5-6 miles of high-tensile electric cross-fencing, more than 15 miles of water pipeline, the installation of 20

water tanks and establishment of three shelterbelts to catch snow for runoff and benefit bird and wildlife habitat. The Douds have partnered with the NRCS and South Dakota Game Fish and Parks on several of these projects.

And Rick has plans for more. Presently, they have cross-fenced to create 12 pastures that the herd is rotated through. Rick’s goal is to cross-fence each of those pastures one or two more times. “We want to get to where we are moving the herd once a day, but we have to get more infrastructure (fencing and water pipelines) in place.”

He adds, “From attending other ranch tours, I’ve seen that it is possible to increase grass production 100% to 200% with good management. That’s exciting.”

Despite the fact that he is nearly 60, Rick isn’t planning to slow down anytime soon.

“I’ve got so many things I want to accomplish yet. I want to experiment with increasing our cross-fencing and rotating our cattle more. I’m excited to see what we can do,” he concludes.



Working with the next generation

For the Doud’s, stewardship of their ranch is important so future generations can enjoy the land as well.

“I want this to be a place family can always come back to. I want to see this be Doud Ranch forever,” Marlis says.

Two of the Douds three grown children currently own some cows on the ranch. Son Jared lives on the ranch and helps with daily management. The move to May calving created a unique opportunity for Jared to establish a woodworking and cabinetmaking business on the ranch — housed in a building that once was the calving barn.

“We had built the barn in the calving pasture to give protection to cows and calves from winter and spring storms. When we moved to summer calving, we didn’t use it anymore,” Rick explains. So, in 2005, the barn was moved to the Doud farmstead, and Rick and Jared remodeled it to be used as Jared’s woodworking shop.

In addition to cultivating stewardship among their own children, the Douds have recently welcomed 23-year-old Rio Reeves as part of their operation. Reeves is interested in building his own cow herd, as well as expanding a wildlife hunting enterprise on the ranch, and the Douds would like to help him make that a reality.

Rick also takes the time to mentor to young ranchers who are expressing an interest in summer calving and rotational grazing. “There is a lot of interest, especially after those ranchers have been through a long winter and stormy spring.”