



Mental Shift

Confidence key to making holistic management work on this North Dakota ranch.

by **KINDRA GORDON,**
field editor

“We’ve been trained to focus on production, but we need to work on improving our natural resources. In turn, we can improve the quality of our products and our quality of life.” That’s a mind-set Bowman, N.D., rancher Chad Njos has come to realize after 18 years of trying a variety of management methods on his ranch.

About seven years ago, Njos and his wife, Amanda, were managing 200 cows and custom-feeding 400 heifer calves to be developed as replacements.

“It was too much work,” says Njos of the high-input, labor-intensive system.

The couple made the decision to quit feeding calves and instead move to a high-intensity grazing system for their cow herd. They also moved their calving date from mid-March to April and May in an effort to “work with nature” and minimize the mud and winter storms that calves had to battle.

“We decided to focus on trying to improve the land versus just taking from it. We began to look at the whole picture — the land, soil and family as well — not just cattle

production,” Njos shares regarding their new holistic approach.

Today, the couple is raising two young sons, ages 10 and 7, and a newborn daughter, and managing 200 cow-calf pairs in the southwestern corner of the state.

Mind over matter

What was the hardest part of their transition? Says Njos, “It took a lot of time to build enough confidence to do it.”

Njos grew up in southwestern North Dakota, where his parents John Lee and Ellen Njos experimented with holistic management and rotational grazing in the 1980s.

He says, “I had a lot of knowledge from my folks, but my thinking got in the way.” He describes falling into the mentality of “wanting to control nature and knowing what to expect,” but came to realize that often meant chasing production rather than land health, a balanced lifestyle and even profit.

A turning point came when Njos and his wife went through holistic management training together.

“Once she was a part of it, we could base our decisions on our goals as a family working with nature,” he says. “The key was writing our goals

down. When we did that, it gave us a map for our future instead of making decisions based on emotions.” Njos says this process also allowed them to back off of things that weren’t part of their goals.

“We want the cattle to work for us, not us working for the cattle,” he says, stating their baseline goal.

Intensive grazing

The Njos’ 200-head cow herd, which is mostly an Angus-based commercial herd, has been put to work helping enhance the range and pastureland on the Cow Chip Ranch that Njos purchased in 1993 while still in college. During the growing season, the cows are moved one to three times daily to garner benefits from high-intensity grazing. Bale grazing is utilized during the winter months. Rest periods are provided to allow for plant recovery both above ground and to the roots below.

After three to four years of using this system, they began to see the improvement in their soils, Njos reports. “We went from grass that got tall and rank to grass that has wider leaves and stays vegetative longer. The quantity and quality of our grass has gotten better.”

They now purchase the majority of hay that is used for winter feed,

and graze the tame pastures and alfalfa fields that used to be hayed. Njos is working to transition these areas to more diverse native species of grasses, legumes and forbs. He’s doing this by broadcasting a native seed mix across former hayfields of smooth bromegrass, and then bale-grazing the area during the winter months or grazing them in the early spring.

“We want the cattle to push the seed into the ground and also add carbon (hay or grass residues) to the ground,” he says.

Njos says that during a five-year period, they’ve seen good results with this process. He had previously experimented with seeding cover crops, but says this method works as well and doesn’t require equipment.

He also reports that he’s finding earthworms in alfalfa hayfields now used for grazing.

“That’s a sign of healthy functioning soils,” says Njos.

Additionally, in spite of moving to a later calving date, they haven’t seen a decrease in weaning weights. “That totally surprised me,” Njos concludes.

Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlemaster for Whitewood, S.D.*

Notes from Njos

What management tips does Bowman, N.D., rancher Chad Njos offer to other producers looking to make a leap to holistic management? As vice chairman of the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition and a member of their mentoring network, he's accustomed to sharing his grazing experiences with others. Here are some of his guidelines.

Let nature do what it wants to do. "One year to the next you can do the exact same thing and have different results. It's eye-opening," Njos says. As an example, he points out that above ground a pasture may still look the same from year to year in spite of changes in management, but that may not reflect improvements to soil health below ground.

"We want to measure what we can see. But the soil and roots are healing, and we couldn't see it. You need to have faith and let things go. That is always a challenge."

You will have failures. "Every time you change one thing, something else changes. I've come to realize a good decision usually comes from a bad decision. You just must do things to the best of your ability; the decisions do become easier."

There are no set rules. Njos emphasizes that flexibility is key to holistic management. He must decide daily how much forage to graze and when to move cows.

"It's a daily decision based on what the cattle and grass conditions look like." Njos keeps a book of each move to monitor the land and cattle performance. That said, he also has the flexibility to set his grazing up to provide for the herd for a week.

"If our family needs to be gone for a week, we have the flexibility that we can do that," he says.

Change gradually. Njos acknowledges they've added a lot of fencing to the ranch, but he adds, "It's been gradual. That's key, to grow into it." Initially they made 100-acre paddocks and moved every five to 10 days. Then, they split those areas into 30- or 50-acre paddocks.

Today, they'll use polywire to split an area down to 10 or 12 acres for the cows to graze during

a morning or afternoon. While it sounds like work, he says the whole process of moving fence and moving cows can usually be accomplished in less than an hour.

Listen to your instincts. For Njos this

lesson came in college. In 1990 when he left for North Dakota State University to pursue an ag engineering degree, Njos told his dad he didn't plan to return to farming and ranching because it was too much work. Yet between the summer of

his junior and senior year, two sections of land went up for sale near his hometown of Bowman. Njos decided to buy it, saying, "After having a desk job, I realized I had farming and ranching in my blood."