

A Portrait For the Future

South Dakota family takes steps to ensure ranch is sustainable for generations.

by **KINDRA GORDON**,
field editor

An Aldo Leopold quote has become a guidepost at the Rock Hills Ranch in north-central South Dakota. The quote is: “The landscape of any farm is the owner’s portrait of himself.”

So believe Lyle and Garnet Perman, who have owned and operated their commercial-Angus operation and grain farm near Lowry, S.D., for four decades. They are especially focused on a sustainable future for the ranch and, with that in mind, have taken several progressive steps as they create the portrait that will portray their legacy.

Foremost is ensuring that the operation includes their son, Luke; his wife, Naomi; and the couple’s twin children, Ella and Isaac. Luke completed a degree in range science in 2006 and then returned to the ranch. He and Naomi were married in 2007 and are the fifth generation of Permans to make their living ranching near Lowry.

Even though Lyle and Garnet are only in their late 50s and haven’t retired, three years ago they discussed — and implemented — a succession plan in which they’ve leased the ranch, equipment and cows to Luke and Naomi. The diversified operation includes raising 400 commercial-Angus cows on native prairie and established pastures, as well as no-till farmland to produce corn, wheat, soybeans and aftermath grazing.

This means Luke makes most of the decisions about the ranch, and Lyle, who also operates an insurance business on the ranch, works for Luke. At the end of each



Rotational grazing has been important for reviving once-overgrazed pastures on the Rock Hills Ranch. Some pastures may only be grazed 10 days during the growing season and rested the remainder of the year.

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year, Luke and Naomi pay Lyle and Garnet in cash and cattle.

Of their atypical arrangement, Lyle explains that they still confer on managing and marketing, but he adds, “Leasing everything to Luke and Naomi has put them in charge and given them responsibility.” The intent is that if something happened to Lyle or Garnet tomorrow, they know the ranch would be in good hands for the future.

The whole picture

Another important aspect of the Permans’ management is taking a holistic approach to managing their land, livestock, wildlife and cultural resources. This means before each decision is made for their ranch, they look at the whole picture instead of just one item.

For example, if a pasture has ample grass growth, the natural inclination might

be to graze it more than normal; however, before they do, they consider how that will impact insects such as native pollinators, large game animals like mule deer, or ground nesting birds like the bobolink. They also evaluate how their decisions may impact their quality of life.

“Rather than focus on what may give the best return in the short term, our focus is on how our actions will impact our bottom line and ecosystem for the long term,” explains Lyle.

The Permans have particularly focused their ranch management decisions on “capturing every raindrop.” The ranch receives approximately 17 inches of precipitation annually — which Lyle estimates is equivalent to about 2 billion gallons of water. “Our number one goal is not to let a drop of water leave the ranch,” he says.

To achieve that goal, they are focused on maintaining grass or crop residue on the land.

“We don’t want to see bare ground,” says Lyle. When bare soil is exposed, rainfall runs off quickly because there is nothing to hold it there, he explains. Without a cover, bare soil also heats up quicker in the sunlight and more soil moisture is lost to evaporation. Keeping a good cover of grass and old organic matter is a top priority.

Decisions to rotational graze, use no-till and plant cover crops were all made to increase how much water will soak into the soil after a heavy rain or fast snowmelt.

Their rotational grazing system during the growing season means cattle move to fresh pastures frequently — a pasture may get grazed once or twice per year. Generally, the cattle don’t spend more than 10 days in a pasture.

Cross-fencing is also key to this system. The Rock Hills Ranch has about 60 miles

of permanent fence — about half of that is perimeter fence and the rest divides pastures into smaller paddocks. Additionally, temporary fence is used to split many of the 40 permanent paddocks into even smaller paddocks for grazing, depending on conditions.

To further enhance land health, the ranch is serviced by four wells, four rural water hookups, 29 dams and dugouts, two developed springs, and 20 stock tanks. By having so many watering points, they are able to affect the grazing distribution of the cattle and achieve a more uniform utilization of each pasture.

Of the changes these management practices have produced, the Permans report that they are seeing a more diverse plant community, as well as a variety of wildlife.

Added benefits

They’ve turned the abundant wildlife into a boon for the ranch.

“Raising wildlife is a byproduct of what we’ve done to improve the land for cattle production,” shares Lyle. Additional revenue for the ranch is generated through hunting — both archery and rifle — for big game like deer and from pheasant hunting. The ranch also generates revenue as a licensed bed and breakfast.

In 2013, Rock Hills Ranch also began offering ranch “safari” tours as a means to engage with the public about ranch life and resource management — and to attract visitors to their on-ranch lodging. The Perman family is also working to develop the “100th Meridian Trail” — so named because the ranch is located on the 100th Meridian. The walking trail on their ranch will offer half-mile to 5-mile hikes. Trail markers will be 40- to 60-pound engraved rocks with cultural information about each location highlighted in a printed brochure.



Lyle, Garnet, Isaac, Naomi, Ella and Luke Perma are the current owners/operators of Rock Hills Ranch.

Participants will be able to access the trail and markers using a handheld GPS unit the ranch will provide.

Lyle explains that efforts such as these are a means for the ranch to tap into its natural and cultural resources and generate income to help keep the ranch sustainable for future generations.

For their stewardship efforts, Rock Hills Ranch was recognized as South Dakota's 2014 Leopold Conservation Award winner. For more about the award, which includes a \$10,000 prize, visit www.leopoldconservationaward.org.



Editor's Note: Kindra Gordon is a cattlemaster and freelance writer from Whitewood, S.D.

Teaching others

Sharing their grazing philosophy and personal ranch experience with others is very important to the Perman family. Since 2011, Lyle has done public speaking at 8-10 events each year.

Lyle's topic is usually focused on "managing 2 billion gallons of water," and he highlights the conservation efforts key to his family's operation.

Of his speaking engagements Lyle says, "It's not for income. It's to educate others. Those in agriculture can learn from what we are doing and the mistakes we've made. Those outside of agriculture can learn about the sustainable practices we are using to make soil healthier, water cleaner and improve the air we all breathe."

Lyle also likes to close his talks by challenging landowners to think about his favorite Aldo Leopold quote. He asks them: "What portrait are you painting?"

Additionally, to help promote the knowledge to be gained in range science, since April 2006 Rock Hills Ranch has sponsored a Jackrabbit Guarantee Scholarship for a student attending South Dakota State University and majoring in range science.

In 2013, the Permans established a paid ranch internship for a non-family member. Lyle explains that doing so has created an opportunity for a college student to gain individual experience in production agriculture, while also helping the ranch with its labor needs. In 2013 their first intern was from Wisconsin. In 2014 they had applications from 33 schools, including three foreign countries. Their 2014 intern is from Missouri.

Managed grazing helps curb costs

The use of rotational grazing, along with grazing cover crops and crop aftermath, have been important to helping the Rock Hills Ranch lower production costs over the years. "We've reduced our winter feeding cost by 50%," reports Lyle. Luke estimates they are able to winter a cow for about 75¢ per day.

Because they are located in an area with ample farm ground, they have capitalized on grazing cornstalks through much of the winter. For 2014, their cattle were able to graze on crop aftermath until the middle of March, with minimal supplemental feeds. Making cattle do the harvesting has also equated to less use of tractors and fuel for winter feeding, and manure from the cattle helps replenish nutrients on the cropland.