

RANCHING FOR PROFIT

Putting Profit into Agriculture

Newsletter #73

September - October, 2001

Be A Friend

Over the next six months we'll hold Ranching for Profit Schools in Oregon, Colorado, Nebraska, Alberta, Montana and Texas. The schedule is on the back of this newsletter. If you have friends, neighbors or colleagues that would benefit from participating in the school please let them know about us. If you give us their names and addresses we'd be delighted to send them a letter and a brochure in the next day's mail. If you benefited from the school, you'll be doing them and us a favor.

Salt in the Wound

According to the US Department of Agriculture, salinization of farmland is a major problem. Each year 25 million acres of productive farm land become too salty to farm. This morning on National Public Radio there was a story about scientists at the University of California and the University of Toronto who have genetically engineered a tomato plant that could grow in salty soil and be irrigated with salty water. They have also done this with canola and plan to develop other major crops to tolerate salt. Rather than stop poisoning the soil, scientists are developing crops that will allow us to continue destructive farming practices. In fact, since the plants tolerate irrigation with salty water, we can even increase the pace at which we poison the soil. The worst part of the story is that the commentator and the scientist thought that this was good news.

WOTB for the Land

In July Kathy and I went to Australia to participate in the Queensland Executive Link Chapter meeting. It was an impressive group with sixty member businesses and over 140 people attending. More than the size of the group, what really impressed us was the progress they've all made improving their businesses and improving their land. In fact, the majority were intensively applying the cell grazing principles they learned at the school.

In this country, we talk about ourselves as the "real environmentalists." If that's true then why are only about 7% of North American commercial livestock producers implementing grazing strategies that really improve the land they manage? The proportion of Ranching for Profit School alumni applying sound land management is higher, but it is still a minority. At the school we tell students that "the numbers come first." While that's true, that doesn't mean we can't start improving the health of the land at the same time. In fact, we usually find that applying cell grazing reduces costs and improves profit. So let's get on with it! If we talk the talk, we'd better walk the walk.

The Concepts In A Nutshell

Rest For The Plant

When cattle graze the top of a plant, they also graze the bottom. After grazing, roots need rest. The amount of rest depends on the growth rate of the plant. If growth is slow, plants need a long rest. In brittle environments, providing too short a rest is the single biggest mistake we make in grazing management.

Graze for the Animal

Short graze periods improve animal performance. By shortening the graze period we keep animals moving to fresh, relatively high quality feed. Julia Stafford told me she feels uncomfortable if animals are in a paddock for more than a week, and that's during slow growth. During fast growth the graze periods should be shorter. The trick is shortening the graze period **and** providing adequate rest. The key is having an adequate number of paddocks per herd.

Large Herds For A Lot Of Reasons

Nine times out of ten, it makes more sense to manage one or two big herds rather than several small ones. It increases the number of paddocks available per herd, increases stock density in those paddocks, and reduces the number of herds we have to check. That's one reason cell grazing usually reduces labor costs, even though animals are checked and moved more frequently than they would be under conventional management. In addition, bigger herds also make it a lot easier to achieve herd effect, and while it may increase the water required at watering points, it reduces the total infrastructure and capital investment required to develop a cell on the property.

Stock Density For The Paddock

High stock density improves the uniformity of use in a paddock. The higher the density, the better. But increasing density through fencing is an expensive proposition. You'll make more progress more quickly by combining herds. Building 2 more paddocks in a 10 paddock cell increases density by 20%. But combining two equal size herds each in ten paddock cells doubles the density and makes twice the number of paddocks available (shortening the graze period).

Stocking Rate for the Range

Match the stocking rate (forage demand) to the carrying capacity (forage supply). We all know that carrying capacity changes year to year. We should select enterprises compatible with the drought risk of the environment, so that when forage supply drops we can reduce the demand. But carrying capacity also changes by season. We should structure our enterprises so that the animals are in sync with the forage cycle.

Work with Nature for Profit

These principles can help us help nature do what comes naturally. This is not only easier and better for the land and animals than the status quo, it is more profitable. Here's a simple example. Imagine someone calving during slow growth when rest periods should be long. To provide 100 days of rest with a short (3 day) graze period, they'd need 34 paddocks. If they calved during fast growth, which may only need a 30 day rest, they can achieve a three day graze period with 11 paddocks. The capital expense and maintenance costs of fighting nature can be enormous.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

You may have heard exciting stories about changes ranchers see from applying "rotational" grazing. Some say that they are seeing more cover, fewer weeds and more desirable species grow where they've never seen them before. It could be that they see these changes because the range is actually improving. But sometimes the reason they see things they never saw before is because they never looked this closely. *If you want to know if your management is working, you must document range conditions.*

Monitoring the range and documenting changes doesn't have to be complicated or difficult. As a minimum, we suggest taking some pictures of key areas on the ranch once each year.

Pick sites where you anticipate change, or would like to see changes. For instance, you might select bare areas, eroded areas, heavy brush, or stands of old moribund grass. You may also want to pick some sites that show your average range in its typical condition.

Once you've found the right spot, mark it with a post. If you use steel posts, it's a good idea to paint the top of the post white or to slip white PVC pipe over it so it will be easy to locate in the future. Since animals and birds tend to use posts as perches or as marking and rubbing posts, thus unduly influencing the immediate area, you'll have to move out from the post to take your picture. Make a note recording the distance and direction you walked so you can walk to approximately the same spot next year.

Aim the camera toward a recognizable feature on the horizon. This will make it easier to locate the photo point location next year. Take the picture with approximately one-third sky and two-thirds landscape within your viewfinder. Now angle the camera downward at a 45-degree angle to get a close-up of the same site. Make sure you are far enough from the post so that the site is not abnormally disturbed. Always take these two photographs in the same order as you go from one site to the next so you'll know which close-ups go with which landscape shots.

Establish 12 photo points on your property so you can take all the photos on one roll of film with 24 exposures. I use a roll of 36 when first establishing the points so I can take a third picture at each site. Take the third shot of the spot from which you actual take the two photo point shots. This works best if you have someone with you who can stand on the exact spot and point in the direction you took your pictures. If you don't have someone to stand there, get your dog to sit on the spot (although it can be tough to get him to point). Taking this third shot will make finding the photo points a lot easier next year.

Keep a good description of the spot from which you take the photo point pictures. You may even want to make a little map showing the distance and direction of each photo point from permanent features like buildings and unique trees. It's a good idea to include the compass bearing from landscape features.

Keep a photo album just for these pictures. The pictures may be worth more than a thousand words when it comes to assessing the impacts of your management. They also establish a history for your property and can help show others how you've used grazing to improve range health. Some clients use their pictures as evidence of their track record of good stewardship and range improvement when negotiating leases. Put the extra picture of the photo point site and the written description of where each photo point is located in the photo album.

Your footprints out in the pasture are the best monitoring tool there is, but a camera is a close second.

NORTH AMERICAN RANCHING FOR PROFIT CONFERENCE

We'll devote a full day of the Ranching for Profit Conference (June 19-22, 2002 in Wichita, Kansas) to evaluating range health. The program will include a tour of the Ferrell Ranch and in-depth sessions on riparian health, soils, and range monitoring. The next newsletter will include a complete agenda and registration information. Block out the dates for this very special program now.

UPCOMING RANCHING FOR PROFIT EVENTS

RANCHING FOR PROFIT SCHOOLS

Klamath Falls, Oregon	November 4 - 10, 2001
Colorado Springs, Colorado	December 9 - 15, 2001
North Platte, Nebraska	January 6 - 12, 2002
Calgary, Alberta	January 13 - 19, 2002
Billings, Montana	February 3 - 9, 2002
Amarillo, Texas	March, 3 - 9, 2002

EXECUTIVE LINK PROGRAMS

Billings, Montana	October 22 -24, 2001
Colorado Springs, Colorado	November 12 -14, 2001
Redding, California	November 15 -18, 2001
Devon, Alberta	November 26 - 28, 2001
Kerrville, Texas	November 29 -December 1, 2001

NORTH AMERICAN RANCHING FOR PROFIT CONFERENCE

Wichita, Kansas	June 19 - 22, 2002
-----------------	--------------------

Ranch Management Consultants Inc.
953 Linden Ave.
Fairfield, CA 94533

We are in the business of putting profit into ranching!

Presorted Standard
US Postage
PAID
Sacramento, CA
Permit #1020