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A voluntary partnership with private landowners

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Cover Photo:
Hawaii's abandoned sugarcane fields are offering potential for more grazing on the islands.

Photo courtesy of Hawaii NRCS.

HAWAII'S HOPE

In November 2004, Hawaii established its own state GLCI Coalition. Here we learn more about how island ranchers are working to revitalize grazing resources and the Hawaiian beef industry.

by Kindra Gordon

Long known for its sugarcane plantations, Hawaii has recently found itself at a crossroads. Most of Hawaii's sugar industry has dwindled in recent years due to other countries producing sugar at a lower cost. As a result, large tracts of Hawaii's prime ag land were left vacant - and many hope it will mean a return of the land to forages for livestock grazing, along with more opportunities to supply beef from the island to Hawaiian restaurants and retailers.

Presently, 60,000 live calves are shipped from Hawaii to mainland feedlots each year - primarily because Hawaii does not have the resources for grain finishing beef or the processing facilities capable of handling large numbers of cattle. Meanwhile, the equivalent of 260,000 cattle are shipped into Hawaii annually as boxed beef to feed consumers - including its large number of tourists.

"It doesn't make sense that the mamma cowherd on all the islands could supply 30% of the entire market we have here, and yet we are only supplying 4-4.5% of the beef consumed here," says Bobby Ferreira, who ranches on the island of Kauai.

The small percentage of cattle that are finished and marketed in Hawaii are done so through natural beef and grass-fed programs. And, Ferreira and other Hawaii ranchers are hopeful that as more ag land becomes available, more grass finishing opportunities will be created.

To that end, they've established Maui Cattle Co., which includes a consortium of seven ranches on Maui and Kauai (one of which is Haleakala Ranch that has a herd of 5,000 cows). Their goal is to "not have any live cattle leave the island." Instead, these ranchers are finishing their cattle "naturally" on pineapple silage and forages, and currently market their product through several stores and restaurants in Hawaii under the label "Maui All Natural Beef." Since beginning in 2002, they report that already demand exceeds supply for their beef.

Ranching for the Next Generation

Ferreira points out that finding ways to finish more beef in Hawaii is important for several reasons - not the least of which is economics. "We don't feel that we can continue to send cattle to

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the mainland - there are too many things you can't control and the price of fuel is continuing to go up," he says.

Additionally, re-establishing sugarcane fields to properly managed grazing lands is important for Hawaii's watersheds, wildlife, soil quality and open space - much of which is quickly being gobbled up by urban developments.

Lex Riggle, a district conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Hawaii, says, "It is exciting to see former sugar land being converted to grazing - especially when you consider that the plantations spent thousands of dollars to fight guinea grass. Now, we are incorporating that forage that had been perceived as a weed into the food and fiber chain."

Riggle adds, "We are rebuilding depleted soils and fighting the invasion of woody plants...watersheds benefit with improved infiltration of the soil; society benefits with open lands and the associated aesthetics. Cattle are the land management tools. We are optimistic that the agricultural replacement for sugar is animal agriculture."

Additionally, for Ferreira one of the greatest benefits is the preservation of the ranching lifestyle for future generations. He says, "Even though we don't come out [of ranching] with overwhelming profit, we value our products and service. What people don't realize is that it takes more time and effort to run a ranching operation than it does to grow houses out here. We take great pride in preserving and sustaining our resources."

Ferreira's business partner Lindy Sutherland adds, "The Maui Cattle Co. concept is to protect Hawaii's ranching heritage so that our grandchildren can see the ranch - it's still there operating; surviving. If we do not pursue this move, I believe that in 6 or 8 years, ranching will be out."

Transition Is Long Process

To achieve their goals of more grass-finished beef in Hawaii - and a viable future for the Hawaiian beef industry - land stewards across the islands are working toward re-establishing abandoned sugarcane fields into grazeable acres. Where sugarcane residues are heavy, the process can take up to 18 months or more. It requires breaking up the sugarcane residue with a harrow disc plow, resting the pasture for 8 to 9 months so that guinea grass - a hardy, perennial bunchgrass - can re-establish, and then cutting and resting the guinea grass another 3 to 4 months before grazing. If the cane was harvested before the land was abandoned, the conversion to pasture only requires mowing the old guinea grass, cross-fencing, and developing water before livestock can begin grazing. If fields are left to convert to grass without the harrowing, it may take up to eight years for grazeable vegetation to return. Legume interseedings are also being evaluated in some of the newly established pastures to determine if they enhance animal performance and improve soil fertility and soil quality.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has provided many, like Ferreira and Sutherland, with technical and financial assistance to re-establish converted fields, including cost-share for fence design, rotational grazing, water developments, the inclusion of legumes in the forage mix, silvopasture design, wildlife habitat, etc.

Les Milnes, another Kauai rancher, has also worked with NRCS to cost-share re-established pastures. Milnes decided to get into ranching three years ago when he saw the sugar plantations scaling back. He leased 750 acres of former sugarcane fields from the Department of Land and Natural Resources and started with six cows. Three short years later, his land is productive pasture and he presently has 66 cattle, with plans to continue increasing his herd size to about 300 head.

Bobby Ferreira, Lex Riggle, Lindy Sutherland.

Milnes says he hasn't been selling finished beef yet since he is just building up his herd, but he hopes to eventually supply grass-fed beef to local markets.

While re-establishing many of Hawaii's former fields into grazing lands is a labor- and time-intensive process - often riddled with challenges over competition for water and land ownership issues - most of the ranchers involved feel it holds great promise. Maui Cattle Company is considering taking on additional ranching interests to help the conservation efforts and expand their grass-fed marketing. And, there's talk of utilizing irrigation to grow higher quality forages for finishing cattle, as well as possibly even growing corn for silage.

Hawaii ranchers are also hopeful that the recently established grazing coalition will help bring like-minded producers together and plan for future grass-fed opportunities. Ferreira and Sutherland say a unified voice and leadership among the islands' cattlemen groups will be important to further develop the state's grazing movement and ensure the success and longevity of Hawaii's ranching operations.

For more information about the Maui Cattle Co. visit www.haleakalamaui.com/cattleco.htm

Genetics, Handling Important Too

In addition to establishing productive pastures for grazing, Bobby Ferreira and Lindy Sutherland have focused on genetics and low-stress handling techniques in their grass-fed endeavors too.

They work to keep the animals calm and Ferreira says, "Just like the land, if you treat the animal good, it will treat you good in return."

Regarding genetics, for over 20 years they've been refining an Angus Plus cross of cattle which includes the Angus and Brahman breeds. The Brahman influence helps the animals in the rough, humid environment, and the Angus genetics improves the carcass traits and tenderness of the grass-finished animals, Ferreira says.

AFGC Launches Certified Grassland Professional Program

The American Forage and Grassland Council (AFGC) has developed a certification program for individuals working in the U.S. forage industry. The program is designed to ensure that individuals have met the qualifications necessary to carry out professional work in the forages area such as planning critical conservation practices and implementing sound resource management of pasture, hayland and grazed cropland. AFGC's new program is similar to the Certified Range Management Consultant Program administered by the Society for Range Management.

To earn certification the AFGC will conduct a thorough evaluation of the credentials of applicants wishing to become Certified Grassland Professionals and they will be required to take a certification exam. However, from January 1 to December 31, 2005, a "grandfather period" of individual applications will be accepted. Individuals can submit their application to AFGC to be screened rigorously by a review panel. If the application is approved, the individual will not have to take the certification exam. After December 31, 2005, all applicants will be required to take the exam.

For more information on this program, contact the AFGC at 1-800-944-2342 or visit www.afgc.org.

Grazing Events

In **CENTRAL TEXAS,** 55 producers from Menard, TX and surrounding counties recently learned that "what you don't know might be able to hurt you" if you don't know your plants. The plant identification workshop was coordinated by Billy Kniffen, Texas Cooperative Extension Agricultural Agent for Menard County. Attendees received a wide variety of information from a troop of experienced range management specialists. Each person attending the workshop received a notebook filled with reference materials for "back home" reading as well as a book on plant identification.

Topics covered included: How Plants Grow; Identification of Grasses, Forbs, and Woody Plants; Poisonous Plant Identification and Plant Response to Grazing Management and Prescribed Burning.

During the afternoon everyone participated in a Plant Identification and Range Evaluation contest. The top three winners were given plant related resource books. Dr. Butch Taylor, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, Sonora, presented topics on prescribed burning, and Dr. Alan McGinty, Texas Cooperative Extension Service, San Angelo offered information on identifying poisonous plants.

Response to the workshop was so favorable that a spring session is being planned to focus on identifying the numerous spring flowers that will be blooming in 2005, as well as continue with other topics on rangeland management.

Submitted by Mark Moseley, Texas GLCI

Over 200 ranchers from **SOUTH DAKOTA** and **NEBRASKA** gathered in White River, SD in mid-January for the 26th annual Ranchers Workshop. SDSU Extension beef specialist Trey Patterson discussed the value of keeping records not only on livestock, but also on grazing management practices to bring efficiency to the ranch. And, Dawn Hnatow, a cattle handling specialist shared techniques for low-stress livestock handling. She pointed out that when livestock are stressed, that takes time away from grazing and impacts performance and profits. Motivational speaker Gloria Schafer shared her message of expressing appreciation and communicating with those we work with in agriculture to bring fun and humor back into everyday ranch life; and afternoon speakers shared management tactics for controlling invasive weeds and pests. This annual event is coordinated by the Mellette and Todd County (SD) Conservation Districts/NRCS/FSA; Sinte Gleska University, local extension service and South Central RC&D.

Upcoming Grazing Events

March 8-9 *Hay Business Conference & Expo, Sioux Falls, SD.* Call 800-722-5334 or visit www.hayconference.com for details.

March 14 *GLCI Steering Committee, Spring Business Meeting, Washington, DC*

March 22-24 *The 2005 Appalachian Grazing Conference will be held at the Lakeview Resort in Morgantown, West Virginia.*

Topics include: Low-Stress Stockmanship, Rotationally Grazing Beef Cattle, Stockpiling Forages, Pasture Fertility, Weed Control In Grazing Systems, Equine Pasture Management, Grass-Fed Beef, Grazing Behavior of Ruminants and many more. The best speakers in the industry will be sharing their information as well as many Appalachian farmers.

For more information, contact Becky Casteel, West Virginia University Extension Service at 304-293-6131 extension 4231.

Or, visit:

http://www.wvu.edu/~agexten/temp/AGC05Broc.pdf

http://www.wvu.edu/~agexten/temp/ApGrazCon.pdf

June 11-15 *American Forage & Grasslands Council Conference, Bloomington, IL*

July 29-Aug. 4 *Soil & Water Conservation Society Conference, Rochester, NY*

In Memorium

Ray Margo, a member of the Texas GLCI Coalition, passed away suddenly at his ranch near Rio Grande City, Texas, January 14, 2005. Ray will be remembered for many things, but especially for his range leadership within NRCS, retiring as the State Conservationist in New Mexico. He and his wife Minnie returned to the family ranch where he continued his leadership in range by serving as Secretary of the Texas Coalition. Cards can be sent to Mrs. Margo at P.O. Box 57, Santa Elena, TX. 78591. Donations may also be made in memory of Ray to Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, 101 E. 3rd Street, Rio Grande City, TX 78582 (phone 956-487-2317).

THE CHAIR'S CORNER

Bob Drake

We are pleased to announce that most of the regional GLCI Coordinator positions have been filled. The new GLCI team is as follows:

In the Portland, OR location will be:
Jeff Repp, coming from the State Range Management Specialist position from Oregon; and **Leonard Jolley,** formerly the NRCS Liaison to the Society for Range Management in Lakewood, CO.

In the Greensboro, NC location:
Kevin Ogles, coming from the State Grazing Specialist position from Michigan. The second position at this location is still vacant.

In the Ft. Worth, TX location:
Dan Caudle, who continues as a Regional GLCI Coordinator for the South Central Region; and **Charles Stanley,** coming from the Area Rangeland Resource Specialist Position in Woodward, OK; and **Reggie Blackweel,** coming from the District Ranger position with the US Forest Service, Black Kettle National Grassland in Cheyenne, OK. National GLCI Coordinator **Kim Stine** is also headquartered in Fort Worth.

Welcome aboard to this new team. Look for more information about these talented folks in a future issue of the GLCI News.

Bob Drake, Chairman
National GLCI Steering Committee

To have your GLCI activities or upcoming events highlighted in this newsletter, contact Kindra Gordon at phone 605-722-7699 or kindras@gordonresources.com

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Dairy Industry
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National Association of Conservation Districts
Kristen Harten
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National Cattlemen's Beef Association
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National Farmers Union
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Society for Range Management
(303) 986-3309

Soil and Water Conservation Society
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Visit the GLCI homepage at http://www.glci.org

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