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GLCI News

Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative



Stocker Steward

By Kindra Gordon

The basis of any successful beef cattle operation is grass management – that’s especially true if you’re a stocker operator. Here, an Oklahoma stocker shares his perspective on getting the most out of the range – and it starts with monitoring.

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Chairman Bob Drake catches us up on the National GLCI Steering Committee’s spring meeting held in March.

Cover Photo

The Phelans’ carefully controlled grazing system has resulted in healthy wetlands, an abundance of wildlife, and increased grazing capacity.

Just as tracking beef cattle performance requires record keeping, successful range management hinges on taking account of the natural resources on the land. For Oklahoma beef producer John Phelan, his “record keeping on the range” means keeping a watchful eye on the soils, plants, animal performance and weather patterns.

Phelan, who operates a stocker operation near Mountain Park, OK, with his wife Tamra and their sons Clay and Grady, relies on his native range to produce enough forage each winter, spring and summer to put efficient gains on the stocker calves he backgrounds prior to sending them to the feedlot.

“We typically buy thin, crossbred cattle with some age. They are not pretty cattle. We make lemonade out of lemons, that’s what this business is all about,” Phelan says. “I buy steers that are economical and that can live off dormant grass and a little protein supplement through the winter. Then when spring comes and they are grazing high quality native range, they turn wrong side out. The compensatory gain is amazing.”

He credits the success of their stocker system to their intense focus on the forage produced on the range. Phelan’s philosophy is that there are two important R’s to manage for on the range: rest and residual. Under that premise, his annual benchmark for utilizing his range efficiently means leaving at least half of the grass standing at the end of the grazing season.

Phelan, who serves on his state’s grazing land coalition, says, “Plants need adequate rest, and you need to leave some residual plant material at the end of each grazing season. Graziers seem to think that just because you rest the range, it will all come back. But I believe it’s important to watch how close you graze that grass. That saying of take half and leave half still applies. Taking over half of the plant really does slow regrowth,” he says.

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Stocker Steward

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The Phelan System

Initially, the Phelan family operated a traditional cow/calf operation. But several years ago, they elected to switch to an all stocker program using high-intensity rotational grazing. Phelan says he felt this change would help them meet their goal of maintaining a high quality of life for their family and keeping costs minimal while conserving the natural resources on the ranch.

They utilize a high intensity rotation grazing system that includes approximately 25 permanent paddocks that the cattle are rotated through. The size of the paddocks vary due to rough terrain, but average around 80 acres. Phelan begins receiving cattle in mid-November to early December and sells in late July or early August. Each fall after the cattle are sold, forage estimates are made to determine the carrying capacity for the coming year. The steers are purchased accordingly.

Quick Rotations

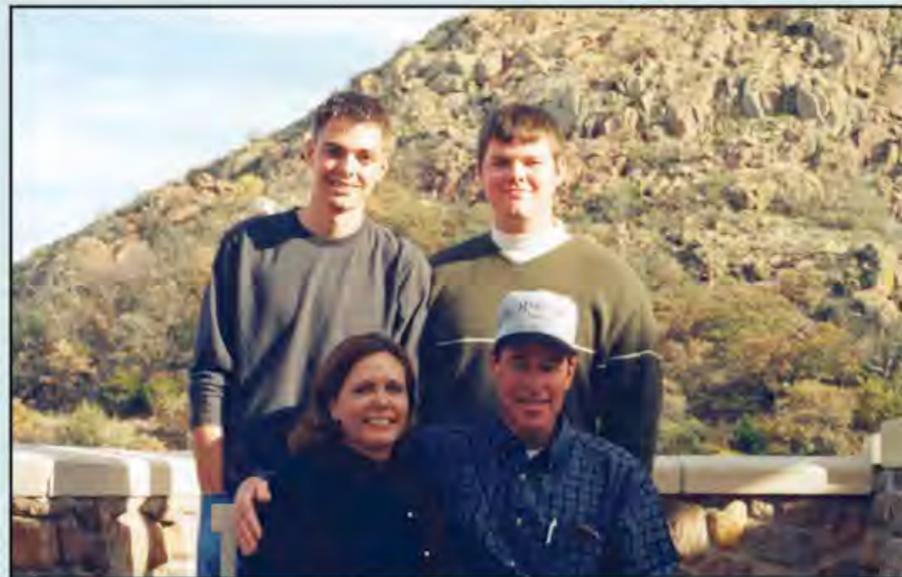
Once cattle arrive in November and December, they begin making rotations through the Phelan's system. All the while, Phelan pays close attention to the forage. During the winter months, the grass is dormant and the cattle will typically make one pass through each paddock, staying in each pasture from 5 to 10 days. At this time, the animals are supplemented with 2 lbs./day of 25% (crude protein) range cubes and gradually increased to 3 lbs./day, depending on weather conditions.

To efficiently utilize the dormant winter forage – and cut winter feed costs, Phelan will often subdivide his permanent paddocks with temporary electric fencing (single strand poly wire).

"I do a better job of rationing out the dormant grass by doing this," he says of the subdivision of paddocks. "By holding them in smaller acreages, they aren't trampling on all of the forage all season long. Instead they are moving to fresh forage every few days," Phelan says.

As the grass greens up and offers more nutrients in early April, the supplementation program ends and time spent grazing in a paddock is shortened to 1-3 days. "The aim is to just go around once in the dormant season, depending on the size and carrying capacity of the paddock," Phelan says. During the active growing season in spring and summer, we'll typically pass through the paddocks twice if enough forage is available, he adds.

In late June or early July, when forage quality begins to decline, approximately 1 lb./day of protein is supplemented. Shipping



The Phelan family.

Front: Tamra and John; Back: Clay and Grady.

usually begins with the largest steers in late July or early August. If drought conditions make it necessary, the Phelans will ship the cattle earlier to protect the range.

The entire ranch receives a rest from August through mid-November when they begin receiving cattle again. At the end of each grazing season, the Phelans always aim to leave some standing forage to protect the health and vigor of the plants,

minimize soil loss and improve water quality in their streams. As a result of their grazing system, they have noticed several improvements including an increase in more

desirable forage species such as big bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, and little bluestem. This in turn has significantly decreased problems caused by erosion and runoff.

Monitoring For Success

In practicing what he preaches, Phelan really monitors how much standing residual forage remains as the stockers rotate through each paddock for the last time in late summer. "If I feel I'm taking too much, I either need to move the animals faster or have a lower stocking rate. I don't think it's a good idea to flog a pasture. The drought has gotten my attention. When it rains you can kind of mess up and your sins will be forgiven. But not when it's dry."

Most recently, the Phelans are working to implement a long-term range monitoring program on their ranch. Phelan says he implemented the system because of the drought. "I became concerned about the land condition when it got dry. So, I needed some way to determine what's happening on the land."

With assistance from Charlie Orchard of Land EKG, Phelan has established monitoring sites that include photo points and transects. Of his newly implemented monitoring system, John says, "I'm very excited about this. I see it as something my sons, Clay and Grady, can use in the future as well."

John Phelan's philosophy is that there are two important R's to manage for on the range: rest and residual.

Plan now for the Second National Conference on Grazing Lands - Dec. 7-10 in Nashville. For more info see www.glci.org.

2002 Farm Bill Focuses On Conservation

The 2002 Farm Bill includes more livestock programs than ever before – including \$17.1 billion for conservation. Many of the programs will reward producers who truly are stewards of the land, which is good news for grazing lands.

As in the past, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) will administer these programs. Here are highlights on what they'll offer:

Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) – This new, voluntary program offers landowners financial incentives to restore and protect grasslands. To participate, private grassland owners in the program agree to place 10, 15, 20 or 30-year rental contracts or 30-year or permanent easements on their land, in return for annual payments equivalent to a portion of the land value.

These agreements still permit grazing and haying, but prohibit any cropping or development activity that disturbs the soil surface.

The motivation for this program came from livestock industry concerns over urban encroachment on grasslands and native range. The Farm Bill authorizes up to 2 million acres to be enrolled in the program over the next four years.

Conservation Security Program (CSP): This new program is designed to offer financial incentives to producers for maintaining practices that address resource concerns. Although it targets cropland practices, grazing, pasture and rangeland management practices are eligible as well.

The CSP program will provide a base payment rate to producers for following approved conservation practices that pertain to nutrient, pest, irrigation, invasive species and grazing management as well as contour farming, cover cropping and fish and wildlife habitat. Contracts are expected to be for five to 10 years, and payments will be based on the number of conservation practices applied.

Conservation of Private Grazing Land (CPGL): This program provides policy to ensure that technical, educational, and related assistance is provided by NRCS staff for those who own private grazing lands. The program calls for specific funding of staff devoted to grazing lands. The technical assistance offered is aimed to promote such practices as better grazing land management; protecting soil from erosive wind and water; using more energy-efficient ways to produce food and fiber; conserving water; and providing habitat for wildlife.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): This well-known program was reauthorized through 2007. Notable changes include: requires a cropping history of four of the last six years; provides for managed haying and grazing and construction of wind turbines; and expands the Farmable Wetland Program to be available nationwide.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP): In place since 1998, this voluntary program offers technical assistance and up to 75% cost-share for landowners who develop and improve wildlife habitat on private land. The 2002 version of WHIP places greater emphasis on utilizing this program to help benefit habitat of threatened and endangered species. Land enrolled in CRP or Water Bank Protection programs is not eligible.

Wetland Reserve Program (WRP): This existing program was also reauthorized and is designed to provide landowners with financial incentives for enhancing wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal land (such as farmland that has become a wetland due to flooding or riparian areas which link protected wetlands) from ag production. Participants voluntarily limit future use of the land, but retain ownership and have the potential to develop wildlife and recreational opportunities on the land. There are options for a permanent or 30-year easement or a restoration cost share agreement for a minimum of ten years. In all three options, cost share funds are available for restoration practices and an annual rental payment is paid to the producer.

Farmland Protection Program (FPP): Designed to help landowners keep their land in agriculture, this voluntary program provides matching funds to State, tribal or local governments and non-government organizations to purchase conservation easements or other interest in land.

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP): Introduced in 1996, this popular program provides 75-90% cost-share funds for practices such as cross-fencing, developing water sources, planting shelterbelts, and even animal waste management facilities. Previous versions of this program limited the amount of cost-share funds that could be paid out to a producer annually, required that eligible producers be in a "priority area," and made large, confined livestock operations ineligible, but those limitations have been removed with the 2002 legislation. Contracts can be for one to ten years with a \$450,000 maximum payment limit per producer over the life of an EQIP contract.

To apply for any of these conservation incentives, start by talking with your local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). For more information visit www.usda.gov/farbill/conservation_fb.html.

Simple Monitoring Steps

The purpose of range monitoring is pretty straightforward – it should provide information to support decision making for range management and animal performance. But for many, implementing a range monitoring system can be pretty overwhelming.

However, it doesn't have to be, according to Roy Roath, a Colorado State University Extension range specialist and range science professor. Roath says monitoring is about "gathering information," and he advocates keeping it simple. Roath offers these strategies for getting started:

1. Use a calendar to track grazing dates for each pasture, the number and kind of animals in each unit, and the average weights of animals if available. A grazing calendar can also be a good place to track precipitation and weather.

2. After cattle have been moved out of a pasture, make a quick trip through the area to determine if grazing was light, moderate or too much. You can adjust next year's stocking rates accordingly.

3. Note annual trends in plant communities. Do weedy species appear to be increasing, or are the grass plants that cattle prefer to graze maintaining a steady presence? If undesirable plants are taking over, you may need to make some adjustments in stocking rates or graze the pasture at a different time of year. To track changes in plant communities, you may consider taking photos in the same location of a pasture year after year, as well as writing down 4-6 of the most prevalent plant species in that area.

THE CHAIR'S CORNER

The National GLCI Steering Committee held their spring meeting March 31 at the Rosslyn Holiday Inn in Washington, D.C. Thirteen members, representing six organizations, were present. The meeting included reports from partner organizations on their policies related to the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Chief Bruce Knight discussed agency highlights and Farm Bill programs. He talked about the nation's drought and asked the steering committee for their recommendations for a drought policy plan.

The afternoon was spent with reports from the 2nd National Grazing Conference committees. All committees report that they are on schedule and expect 2,000-2,500 participants at the conference Dec. 7-10 in Nashville.

The remainder of the business meeting was spent discussing the week's congressional visits and the fall business meeting which will be Sept. 4-6 in Rapid City, South Dakota.

SAVING FARMLAND MAKES CENTS

A recent American Farmland Trust survey shows that privately owned farm, ranch and forest lands boost community coffers by contributing more in tax revenues than they require back in public service. In contrast, residential development requires costly public services that surpass its tax contributions.

The report, Cost of Community Services Studies; Making the Case for Land Conservation costs \$16.95 To order, visit www.farmland.org or call 800-370-4879.

Bob Drake, Chairman

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