

Adapting To Drought

These South Dakota ranches have all employed conservation-minded methods to help their livestock enterprises stay viable – even during drought years.

By Kindra Gordon

Across the prairie of western South Dakota, lack of precipitation on the pastures and fields has become an all too common occurrence. “We’re used to drought, and have overcome it by working around it,” says Dick Kjerstad, who has a livestock and farm partnership with his family near Wall, SD. Kjerstad also represents the American Farm Bureau Federation as a producer on the National GLCI Steering Committee.

Other South Dakota farm and ranch families have also had to develop strategies to deal with drought, and some of those efforts were on display in early September during a tour of four South Dakota ranches. The tour was attended by members of the National GLCI Steering Committee in conjunction with their annual business meeting held in Rapid City. Following are highlights of the four operations that were visited:

Koch Ranch – LaVerne and Sue Koch got their start in agriculture over 45 years ago by operating a dairy and a small cowherd. When one of their sons purchased the dairy about 10 years ago, the Koch’s decided to increase the size of their beef herd.

Since then, they have implemented a rotational grazing system for their cow/calf pairs and moved their calving date from February to April – more the way Mother Nature intended, they say. The Koch’s have been pleased with their herd’s performance under this system. And they report that although weaning weights are slightly lower, they have more live calves to sell – thus they actually are marketing more pounds of beef.

Additionally, in the last decade LaVerne and Sue have planted over 1,000 acres back to grass mixtures, and have planted over 5,000 trees on their property, saying they “sincerely believe that wildlife habitat and healthy grasslands are a major responsibility of land ownership.” Their stewardship even spills over to their hayfields, where LaVerne leaves uncut strips every 10 ft. across the field. He reports that this helps to catch snow moisture, and also offers protection for birds and wildlife.

Admittedly, the last two years of severe drought has been a large learning curve for the Koch’s and other ranchers, “We’ve had to develop new and different strategies. Fortunately, our rotational grazing system has allowed us to have the flexibility that many other ranchers in the area have not had,” says LaVerne, who currently serves as president of the SD Grassland Coalition. “The key to surviving drought is you’ve got to be extremely flexible. If the markets or weather changes, a rotational system allows you to make changes too.”

During the drought, the Koch’s have also been pleased to see that their stewardship during the last decade has helped their pastures – especially native rangelands – rebound from the lack of moisture. All total last winter, they only fed hay for five weeks, and were able to graze the herd the rest of the time.

Of their nearly five decades of ag experience, Sue reports it’s been a road to discovery – neither she or her husband have formal training in grazing management, but instead have learned through grazing schools and ranch tours.

LaVerne says, “We’ve become wealthy, by that I mean we’re doing what we’ve always wanted to do, the way we want to do it.” Both he and Sue are happy to see that

GLCI has had positive impact for other South Dakota producers as well, by hosting workshops and demonstration sites that teach others about grazing management opportunities.

Keiffer Ranch – Like the Koch's, Mark Keiffer's cow/calf operation is also geared toward a rotational system. Cows calve in mid-February in Keiffer's state of the art calving facility and then graze during the summer months on forest service allotments. Keiffer also has irrigated hay ground which the cows are allowed to graze after the haying season.

Keiffer believes management has made all the difference for his operation. "I believe in management intensive grazing," he says. "We haven't been impacted as much by drought because of our management. There is money in ranching if you manage properly."

Williams Ranch – With his family's ranch located adjacent to South Dakota's Badlands National Park, Gene Williams has long been an ardent conservationist who has worked to inform and educate tourists and park staff about the benefits provided by ranching and conservation practices. Currently, the Badlands has a herd of buffalo that graze in a wilderness area, but cattle grazing is not allowed in the Park.

"Our goal is to show that cows aren't something that's evil, but something to be managed," Williams says.

To that end, Williams devised a unique arrangement a few years ago when he and his sister's were settling their father's estate. Williams drafted a proposal with the SD Parks and Wildlife Foundation, in which he sold a portion of his ranch to come up with money to settle the estate in return for 20-year access for hunting, fishing, biking and hiking. Williams is the lessee of the land and has a buyout provision in the contract that enables him to become owner of the property again when the term is up.

Williams made the agreement in part to maintain free hunting access for friends and also to provide an educational opportunity for park visitors to learn about the workings of a cattle ranch.

The ranch-access agreement includes plans for a six-mile-long bicycle trail that features signposts with full-color-photos and text describing the land and its inhabitants. Walk-in hunting areas are also available to the public as part of the agreement.

"The hope was that people who aren't familiar with the positives that result from active management tied to agriculture will understand and see some of the benefits provided to wildlife, water quality and landscape scenery from ranching," Williams says. "We want the public to be aware of the benefits of conservation by landowners, so they support the use of tax dollars for conservation."

Kjerstad Family Partnership – Dick and Patty Kjerstad have developed a diversified farming and livestock operation with their adult children that also relies on conservation to make a living from the land.

The Kjerstad Livestock Partnership is a family operated beef enterprise that has consisted of a cow-calf, yearling and feedlot enterprise. Additionally, cash crops of wheat, millet, safflower, sunflowers, barley, oats, garbanzo beans and alfalfa hay are raised under the Kjerstad Farm Partnership.

"The goal of this partnership is to convert grass to beef in the most economical way we can," says Dick. In past years, cross-fencing, water developments and pasture renovations were implemented under the Great Plains program, so that cow/calf pairs

could be managed under a rotational grazing system. Today, the cow/calf pairs have been sold, and instead, yearlings and 5,000 unweaned calves are purchased and fed out on grass, crop aftermath, and in the feedlot. Grain raised on the land is also fed in the feedlot.

On their farmland, the Kjerstad's predominately utilize no-till farming methods – which leave the soil undisturbed from harvest to planting and helps store precious moisture. Planting is accomplished in a narrow seedbed or slot created by disk openers.

When it comes to conservation methods, Kjerstad says, “If it's economically feasible, and better for the land, then we should be doing it, whether we receive cost-share funds or not. It's so much more important to have technical people out on the land teaching producers how to do something, versus the cost share funds to pay them to do it. That's why GLCI efforts have been successful.”

He adds, “I think without conservation methods in place in our area, today would be a Dust Bowl worse than the 1930s, because this year some places have recorded less rain than in the 1930s.”

That's certainly something to ponder, and a testament to the power of conservation management.

GLCI's History

Twelve years after it was established, the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative has nearly 30 active state coalitions.

Established in 1991, the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) has always worked toward the mission of providing high quality technical assistance on privately owned grazing lands. Supporters of GLCI seek to offer this assistance on a voluntary basis and hope these efforts will increase the awareness of the importance of grazing land resources.

The initial GLCI was formed at a June 1991 meeting in Bozeman, Montana, when a group of concerned state and national agricultural, conservation, wildlife and scientific organizations gathered to discuss the declining level of technical assistance being provided by NRCS to owners and managers of private grazing lands. Organizers of the meeting believed that NRCS resources had been diverted from grazing land work to conservation compliance and other programs established in the 1985 farm bill.

Since its inception, GLCI efforts have been carried out through coalitions of individuals and organizations functioning at the local, state, regional and national levels. The coalitions include livestock producer organizations, scientific and professional grazing resource organizations, conservation and environmental groups, and state and federal natural resource and agriculture agencies all working toward the goal of grazing management on private lands. Today, nine national organizations are the partners behind GLCI, they are the:

- American Farm Bureau Federation
- American Forage and Grassland Council
- American Sheep Industry
- Dairy Industry
- National Association of Conservation Districts

National Cattlemen's Beef Association
National Farmers Union
Society for Range Management
Soil and Water Conservation Society

Livestock producers representing each of these organizations serve on the national GLCI steering committee. One of those individuals is ardent conservationist John "Chip" Merrill, who says, "The fact that nine organizations have come together for the benefit of one cause – providing technical assistance on grazing lands – really dictates the importance of the GLCI effort. GLCI has become one of the strongest forces in support of conservation legislation, and I credit that to the efforts of all nine member organizations."

Looking ahead, GLCI plans to continue working for increased availability of technical assistance provided by NRCS on private grazing lands. Expanded research and education programs in grazing management are also goals of GLCI.

To that end, GLCI will host the Second National Conference on Grazing Lands Dec. 7-10 in Nashville, Tennessee. This one-of-a-kind event is dedicated to informing and educating producers about innovative grazing management ideas and research. This conference is just one example of the many efforts of those who support the grazing lands conservation initiative.

For more information about GLCI, its partner organizations, or past issues of the GLCI Newsletter, visit www.glci.org.

THE CHAIR'S CORNER

By Bob Drake

The National GLCI Steering Committee held their fall meeting Sept. 5-6 in Rapid City, South Dakota. A tour was held on Friday, Sept. 5 with 60 GLCI partners, advisory members and guests participating. The group toured the Laverne and Sue Koch ranch, Kjerstad Family partnership, Gene and Linda Williams's ranch, Badlands National Park and Mark Keiffer ranch. Lunch was provided by the East Pennington Farm Bureau. *(See details about each of these operations in the story on the front page of this newsletter.)*

On behalf of those who participated in this annual event, I would like to especially thank Dick and Patty Kjerstad, participating ranches, and the Farm Bureau ladies for assisting with the tour.

On Saturday, Sept. 6 the National Steering Committee held their annual business meeting. Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Bruce Knight briefed the committee on the progress of the Farm Bill programs and technical assistance. We appreciate Chief Knight taking time out of his busy schedule to visit his home state of South Dakota and meet with the GLCI Steering committee.

Other reports were given by Tim Reich, Second Vice-President of National Association of Conservation Districts, John Peterson, 2nd National Grazing Conference and Sandy Wyman, Bureau of Land Management, National Riparian Team. Next year's fall business meeting and tour will be in Fort Worth, Texas in early September.

Looking ahead, we are anticipating a very successful 2nd National Grazing Conference set for Dec. 7-10 in Nashville. If you haven't already registered, visit www.glci.org for details, or go to the site after the event for highlights from the conference. Hope to see you there!

Intermountain Planting Guide Available

More than 100 plants suited to rangelands, pastures, streambanks, road cuts or other sites needing reseeding are profiled in a unique handbook, "Intermountain Planting Guide." The easy-to-use, 104-page publication is a plant bible for Utah, Idaho, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, Montana, Wyoming and Oregon. It was compiled by Agricultural Research Service scientists in collaboration with Utah State University and NRCS experts.

Through brief summaries, the authors of the text make recommendations based on soil type, annual precipitation, elevation and other key environmental factors that influence a plant's success. To order, contact Utah State University Extension Publications by calling 435/797-2215 or e-mailing extension.publications@usu.edu, request bulletin number AG 510. The \$11.70 cost includes shipping. Mail orders can be made to USU, 860 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-8960.