

An Eye For Grass

SRM bestows Oklahoma couple with “Outstanding Grazing Lands Managers” award.

By Kindra Gordon

Like many lifelong ranchers, John and Tamra Phelan have always recognized the importance of being stewards of the land. But recently, the stewardship efforts of this Mountain Park, Oklahoma couple earned them special recognition by the Society for Range Management (SRM) when they were awarded the honor of "Outstanding Grazing Lands Managers." This is the first year that SRM has presented such an award, but the organization plans to make it an annual affair.

The Phelan's were selected because of their long-standing commitment to implementing sound range and wildlife management practices on their Oklahoma ranch. Here is their story:



The Phelan family at their ranch in Oklahoma.

John's keen range management knowledge is the result of a lifelong affiliation with ranching. He is a 1973 graduate of the ranch management program at Texas Christian University (TCU) and worked for several large ranches in Texas and Oklahoma before going into business for himself. Of his interest in range resources, he says, "My dad lit the flame and John "Chip" Merrill fanned it." Merrill, a past SRM president, was director of the TCU ranch management program for the better part of 30 years.

Over the years, John has also worked closely with range professionals from the NRCS, Extension Service, Noble Foundation and Holistic Resource Management.

Initially, the Phelan's operated a traditional cow/calf operation. But several years ago, they elected to switch to an all stocker program using high-intensity rotational grazing. John says he felt this change would help them meet their primary goal of maintaining a high quality of life and minimal debt while conserving the natural resources on the ranch. They've been pleased with the results.

The Phelan System

The Phelan's use a high intensity rotation grazing system with their stocker program. They have approximately 25 permanent paddocks on their native range that they rotate their animals through. The size of the paddocks vary due to rough terrain, but average around 80 acres. John begins re-

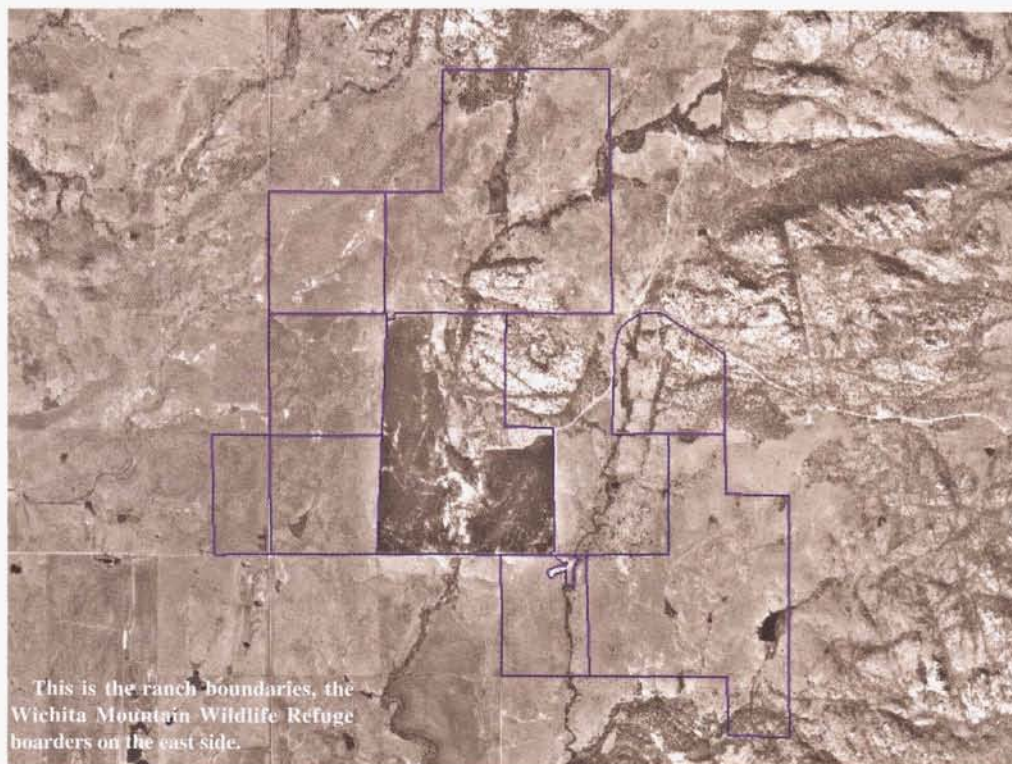
ceiving cattle in mid-November to early December and sells in late July or early August depending on the amount of grass and condition of the cattle.

"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," John says. "I buy steers that are economical and that can live off dead 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."

During the winter months when the grass is dormant, the stocker 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, John often subdivides 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. He says keeping the cattle in a small area and essentially forcing them to utilize the dormant forage before moving them



This is the ranch boundaries, the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge borders on the east side.

to a fresh paddock is key to winter grazing. "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. Even though it is dormant and there may not be much there, there is some nutrition and you are more efficient at utilizing it. We do this all winter long, and in March we're still moving to fresh paddocks where the grass isn't stale or trampled on," John 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. When the forage is green, the animals initially rotate through the system quickly and then will pass through each of the paddocks again by mid- to late summer. This rotation system allows the animals to take advantage of the highest quality forage available and still allows adequate time for rest, say the Phelans.

"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 usually begins with the largest steers in late July or early August. The lighter weight steers will be held on grass longer to allow for more gain. However, this is not a hard and steadfast rule. 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.

By combining all of their animals into one herd, rotating them through their cell grazing system, and allowing for adequate rest periods, the Phelans 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.

They believe their high stock density and rapid rotation through pastures helps achieve uniform utilization of all plants and helps minimize problems with poisonous plants, since most problem plants are grazed before they reach their toxic stage. The rapid rotations and high stock densities help the livestock to be free of flies and also aids in better distribution and recycling of urine and manure. Finally, this system also allows plants to stay healthier and robust due to periodic grazing, rather than become decadent through infrequent use.

Monitoring For Success

Those improvements are primarily due to the Phelan's watchful eye on their pastures. In the fall of each year, forage estimates are made to determine the carrying capacity for the coming year, the steers are purchased accordingly. John usually purchases 300-400 head of light weight, medium frame cattle in late November and early December.

But, facing their fifth year of drought this year, the

There were two other nominees for this year's Excellence In Range Management Award. They included from the Arizona SRM Section the Anvil Ranch near Tucson, AZ, operated by Pat King and Mary Miller. And, from the Texas SRM Section the XXX Ranch operated by John "Chip" Merrill near Crowley, TX.

Phelan's have continued to decrease their stocking rate. "We currently have 150 head turned out," John reports. They've reduced their numbers in hopes of maintaining their range in good condition despite the inadequate rainfall.

Still there are challenges. Like any grazing operation, the Phelan's do have weeds, but they don't turn to chemicals to solve the problem. "I don't feel I can afford to spray them," John says. Instead, his strategy is to try to figure out what they are doing to cause the weeds and if possible fix it. "We've seen a lot of weeds the past few years, just due to drought. I try to deal with them through my grazing strategy, and I believe I can," he says.

Last summer Phelan did spray about 150 acres of mesquite with Reclaim and Remedy and reports that he had excellent results. "It's extremely expensive (about \$30/acre), but it worked very well. I hope not to have to spray that area again for a minimum of 10 years, maybe even 15-20," he says.

To add efficiency to their grazing program, the Phelan's have also worked with NRCS as part of their fecal sampling project. The collection of these samples has helped them make more economical and timely decisions concerning the supplementation of their cattle, the quality of the grass and the movement of the cattle.

Most recently, the Phelan's 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.

Last summer John established three monitoring sites with assistance from Charlie Orchard of Land EKG. The sites 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 can use in the future as well." He recognizes the importance of protecting and cultivating his resources on a day to day basis as well as for the future of their operation.

John adds, "We're starting gradually with just three monitoring sites because we don't want to overload ourselves with information. But I do plan to establish more monitoring sites and keep up with this over the long-term."

Even with the monitoring system in place, Phelan says much of range monitoring is still simply having an eye for the grass. "I often step off an acre square and visually appraise it as to what that acre can support. It's trial and error."

John says much of the success of his grazing system hinges on what he calls the two R's: rest and residual. "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.

About The Award

The Outstanding Rangeland Management Award will be presented annually by the Society for Range Management (SRM). The award honors exemplary rangeland management and recognizes the "best of the best" from among Section Excellence in Range Management winners.

The objective of the award is to demonstrate to the public and other range managers outstanding examples of management which result in long-term health of the range resource while providing efficient production of livestock, wood products, and water, as well as supporting wildlife, esthetic and other non-commodity values.

The international winner is selected from poster presentations representing the winners' operation given at the annual SRM meeting. For more information about nominating a range manager for 2003 please contact, Jack Vandervalk at vans@telusplanet.net or Trina Curtis at Trina.Curtis@id.usda.gov.

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. This 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."

John refers to his system as "time controlled grazing," and says, "It all has to do with time - either time grazed or time rested." But he cautions that implementing such a system won't automatically increase carrying capacity.

"Grazing systems like this were first sold as offering the ability to 'double your stocking rate.' But that is not true, especially if it doesn't rain. My advice to producers is to leave their animal numbers alone, get their feet wet with a controlled grazing system and then start measuring forage and stock accordingly. The only way to increase stocking rate is if you're growing more forage than before," John says.

He adds, "Critics ask, if you can't guarantee an increase in stocking rate, then why spend all that money on cross-fencing and implementing such a system? But to me it's more than a monetary pay. You are taking better care of your country. And, in the long-term you will be rewarded for that."

Perhaps most importantly, the Phelan's are committed to sharing that philosophy and their ranch with others. Their ranch has served as a showcase for many tour groups, and they offer recreational leases, primarily for hunting and fishing, in order for the public to enjoy their resources.

It is all of these attributes combined that make it evident that the Phelan's truly are outstanding grazing lands managers.