

A Premium on Livestock Management

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Improving rangeland on 2.1 million acres of state school land in Texas is now being accomplished in a cooperative effort by the University of Texas Board of Regents and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service (SCS).

The no-nonsense conservation policy was implemented in 1969.

The land in question is scattered across 19 counties in West Texas and was set aside for higher education by the state legislature in 1876 and 1886. It is controlled by the University's Board of Regents. Its oil and gas production has produced more than \$1 billion in revenue for the University's permanent fund.

The surface, mostly rangeland, is leased to 130 livestock producers (lessees) who stock it with cattle, sheep, and goats. Lack of grazing management coupled with drought and other factors caused much of it to slowly deteriorate.

In 1969, Billy Carr, manager of University lands (surface interests); Dr. E. Don Walker, Chancellor; and the University's Board of Regents, decided to try to reverse this trend.

Before that time, oil and gas companies that leased mineral rights on the land paid lease and royalty payments to the University but surface damages for oil field activities were paid to the ranchers who leased the surface rights.

The 1969 decision changed that. First, damage money was paid to the University rather than the ranchers. The money was put in escrow and could be used by the lessee only to help carry out needed conservation work and related improvements.

Second, all lessees were told to contact SCS personnel assisting eleven local soil and water conservation districts in the 19 counties and to request assistance in working out a complete conservation plan on the unit. The rancher and the SCS conservationist would go over the land to determine the treatment needed. Two practices were required on all rangeland; proper grazing use and periodic deferred grazing. Lessees selected the final combination of measures to install and were allowed to use damage money to pay for brush control, range seeding, cross fencing, water development, corrals, or anything else needed to get conservation work applied to the land.

After each plan was completed, it was sent to Carr for review. If it met the needs of the surface and would result in grassland improvement, it was approved.

The livestock producer agreed to carry out the plan as a condition of the new lease. SCS agreed to provide the technical assistance needed to plan and install the conservation work and to go over each tract with the lessee at least once every year, review progress, help revise the plan if needed, make an annual status report, and then send it to Carr.

If the report indicated that the lessee was carrying out the plan, it was approved, but the failure to carry out the plan would result in termination of the lease unless quick action was taken to correct any deficiencies. Mr. Carr stated that the program has gone so smoothly since 1969 that opposition to the policy has vanished.

"We are extremely pleased with the way things have worked out, especially with the way SCS personnel have been able to show our lessees the value of grassland improvement measures. We have turned a lot of ranchers into conservationists. We have shown them that they can make more net profit by resting rangeland periodically," Carr said.

"But this could never have been done without the help and cooperation of the Soil Conservation Service," Carr continued. "We do not have the personnel to work one-to-one with our lessees but SCS does. The district conservationists and their staffs have been very patient working with our lessees, teaching and showing them the principles of range management. I can't say how much we appreciate it."

He said that some lessees who had never worked with SCS feared that the conservation policy would be too stringent. But these same ranchers are now very complimentary of the help they have received.

In 1977, Carr and the Board of Regents initiated a new flexible grazing policy. As the old five-year lease expires, the lessee is offered a new ten-year lease that is based on the price of livestock each year. When beef or lamb prices are down, the lease goes down. When prices go up, the lease goes up. The flexible grazing leases work as follows:

The rental price for cattle is based on the average price per hundred weight of 400 to 500-pound feeder calves with medium frame, and number two muscle at the San Angelo livestock auction. Prices are averaged from July 1 to October 31. That average price per hundred weight, less 30 percent, is the cost per animal unit per year grazing fee for one cow the following year. (One cow is one animal unit; one 500-pound steer is 0.5 animal unit.)

For example, if the average price paid for calves is \$50 per hundred, the following year's lease will be \$35 per animal unit. As a result, the per acre lease is higher on ranches with better land or higher rainfall than it is on shallow land in low rainfall areas. For 1980, the lease price for cattle was \$59 per animal unit.

The price for sheep is based on 60 to 70-pound feeder lambs, grade good, July 1 to October 31, at San Angelo. Five sheep equal one animal unit. For 1980, the animal unit cost for sheep was \$49. The animal unit price for goats is the same as sheep.

Leases are paid in advance semi-annually based on the number of animal units the producer plans to run. If this

number changes, an adjustment is made for the second six months.

The flexible grazing policy adopted in 1977 caused more opposition than the 1969 conservation policy, Carr said. This opposition, however, is not nearly as strong now as it was three years ago.

Carr has also worked out a new deer management policy on University lands designed to bring the buck:doe ratio to 1:1.

Here's how it works: Each fall Carr's assistant, Steven Hartmann, flies over each unit in a helicopter to make a deer census. If the buck:doe ratios are out of balance—and most of them are—the rancher is told to correct them with hunting pressure.

"We have several leases where there are ten times as many does as bucks," Hartmann stated. "That's because most people want to hunt bucks.

"But if you harvest one-fourth of your deer herd each year as wildlife biologists recommend, and you kill only bucks in a one-out-of-ten situation, you simply are not harvesting enough deer. The excess does over-browse the land, damaging the rangeland resources. Then when a bad winter hits, the deer die by the dozens. And that's a waste."

After the deer count, the lessee is required to pay the University a set price for the number of does and bucks Hartmann says ought to be harvested. Then the lessee is allowed to lease the land to hunters who are told what to harvest.

Any lessee who fails to harvest the specified number of does needed to get the herd into something close to a 1:1 ratio is in danger of having his lease canceled.

Hartmann says the policy is now so popular with ranchers that many are asking how they can get a census made on their ranches that they own.

A similar policy for harvesting dove and quail will be worked out soon.

"But let me point out something," Carr stressed. "We could never have pulled off any of these policies without the full support of Dr. Walker and the Board of Regents. They have backed us all the way.

"Dr. Walker has told me several times that although we are now making money out of oil and gas, someday it will be gone. When that time comes, we will have to try to make our money out of the surface. That line of reasoning, and his continued support and encouragement, makes my job a lot easier."

Billy Wyche, Jr. leases 26,650 acres from the University near Odessa in a 11-inch rainfall belt. Wyche doesn't own any land, but he takes care of his lease as if he owned it. In fact, he was named Outstanding Conservation Rancher of the Year in 1979 by the Andrews Soil and Water Conservation District and received an Excellence in Grazing Management Award from the Texas Section of the Society for Range Management in 1977.

I asked Wyche what he thought about being required to defer rangeland and carry out other needed conservation measures as a condition of leasing University lands.

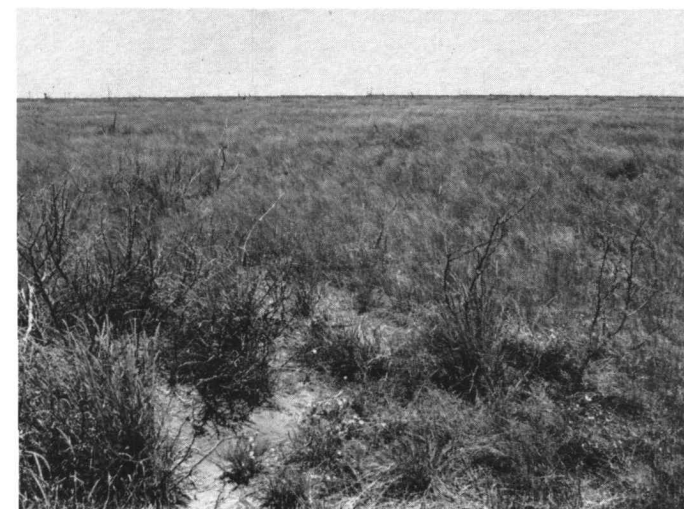
"I was looking for some way to improve the grass on this place when that policy went into effect," Wyche said. "I could see that the land was going downhill. My father first leased this ranch in 1932. I was working for him when I took the lease over in 1964. We had tried a three-month deferment, but it didn't seem to work out too well. The first time we used it, the pasture seemed to turn to grassburs.



Billy Wyche, Jr., carries out conservation work on a 26,650-acre tract of public land near Odessa he has leased from the University of Texas Board of Regents since 1964.



Wyche, who raises Hereford cattle, says that he never feeds hay; when he needs to feed hay, he sells cattle.



Wyche controlled these mesquites with a chemical spray. He rests the rangeland in a regularly planned sequence using a four-pasture, three-herd grazing system.



Through careful attention to grassland management, Wyche is gradually getting vegetation back on some once active sand dunes.

"When I started leasing the land, I tried some more 90-day deferments," Wyche continued. "But as soon as we turned the cattle back in, the grass would disappear almost overnight. Then I tried a six-month deferment, and it seemed to work a lot better."

Before Wyche's lease expired in 1970, he contacted SCS personnel at the Andrews Field Office and asked for help in working out a long-range conservation plan.

"I knew that Billy Carr was requiring at least a 90-day deferment on all rangeland every third year," Wyche said. "But I asked for a six-month deferment every fourth year. That's what we worked out and Billy approved it."

Joe Chapman, district conservationist for SCS at Andrews, said Wyche's deferment system is what range scientists call a basic four-pasture, three-herd planned grazing system. The ranch is divided into four large pastures and 11 small ones. About June 1, cattle are divided into three herds and placed in three large pastures; the fourth pasture is deferred until about December 1. Each year, a different large pasture is rested in rotation.

The smaller pastures are also deferred, but on a different schedule; they are grazed when needed to provide extra forage.

Wyche has made two complete rotations around the ranch and is now resting the second pasture in the third cycle. He has also used chemical sprays to control mesquite on some 2,600 acres of land and has used other brush management methods on wooly loco and shinoak. He said the grazing system and brush management work is showing good range-land improvement and he is now feeding less during winter months than when he started it.

He is now stocking the ranch with Hereford cattle at the rate of 7.2 animal units per section.

I asked what he thought about the flexible grazing lease policy.

"My lease doesn't expire until 1984, so it's too early to tell how much my lease will go up," he replied. "But I'm afraid that if a man ranches by old standards, it will break him. We will no longer be able to afford the luxury of keeping dry cows or raising a bunch of late calves."

In other words, the premium will be on livestock management.

And livestock management, coupled with the use of sound range management principles, is steadily changing the looks of 2.1 million acres of public land in Texas. ●



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