

More Grass Means More Cattle

Dick Whetsell

The years 1980 and 1981 represent the poorest net profit for the cattle industry since 1933. And I wonder about 1982. We must improve our cost of production position and at the same time get more for our table product if we are to stay in business. The United States produced more table meat in 1981 than in 1980 but less of it was beef.

Our grass must be used more efficiently to keep costs down. At the same time our ranges must be improved and/or maintained for future use. The old systems won't do this. It appears the new intensive, short duration systems could have value.

Just ranching as usual is not going to cut it in the 1980's. Even producing 60 to 80 pounds of beef per acre on native grass will not let us survive on \$400 an acre rangeland. The tremendous increase in all cost items, with little or no increase in beef prices, has backed us into a corner. The only way out is increased grass production, *grazed in a profitable manner*.

The pressure of increased costs, coupled with old methods of grazing, is the thing that is forcing many ranchers out of business. Long-time operators, men who know the business well and have done a good job, are now being forced into liquidation. Most of the ranches of any size sold in Osage County, Oklahoma, since 1970 have changed hands again, according to SCS Range Conservationist Sid Brantly.

To survive, new ideas and new methods must be incorporated into the ranching operation. Most ranches, as now operated, can not stand heavier stocking rates without further damaging the grass, resulting in lower carrying capacity.

But, if, the native grass rancher is to stay in business, he must grow more grass and graze more cattle on the ranch unit. This has to be done by some method other than what we now call "proper stocking."

Ranchers have reduced their grass harvesters, livestock, but many of the individual plants are still being damaged. To the individual plant being overgrazed, it makes no difference whether there is one cow or 100 in the pasture.

With conventional grazing methods a part of the range is being overused regardless of the stocking rate. It's time to change harvesting methods. Range researchers have been advocating rotation deferred grazing for many years because it usually improves range condition and boosts carrying capacities. However, even under this system many

individual plants are still overgrazed, thus suffering a loss in vigor and production.

When cattle graze the same area for months (or even weeks) at a time, new plant growth is selected first because of its high palatability. As the new growth is continuously removed, the plant is robbed of its leaves, which supply food for the plant. Each time the plant begins to grow a new leaf, a grazing animal is nearby to immediately nip off this fresh growth. As this process of growing and grazing is repeated throughout the growing season, the plant's root system is literally starved and a part of it will die.

A grazing program must be designed that will allow the grass to make use of its new growth to first feed itself—and then harvest it. To accomplish this in Oklahoma, a rotation system could be set up involving one herd and 3–6 pastures. The livestock are moved every 8–10 days to a fresh pasture. This insures total uniform use and allows an individual plant to be grazed only one time in most cases, and then it has 25–30 days to recover before being grazed again. This encourages maximum forage production.

Continuous grazing may no longer be an economical method of producing beef. We've postponed the shift to more intensive grass management, but now it's time to act. We have to produce more pounds of beef per acre in order to stay competitive at the meat counter. Most Oklahoma ranches could begin this kind of management system just the way they are—without expensive fencing.

We have designed a system for our 40,000 acre Foraker ranch that requires no structural changes. It's really very simple. We are putting more cattle in a pasture for a shorter time. There are 21 pastures, rotated with six herds. Depending on the amount of forage and size of each pasture, the steers will graze 7–10 days and be moved to an adjacent pasture. The grass will then have 3–4 weeks of complete rest before being grazed again. One important thing to remember is to move the cattle on time.

The native ranges in Oklahoma are chiefly covered with warm-season grasses, so an intensive rotation system will not be so effective during the winter months. During the dormant season cattle will winter better scattered over all the ranch. Considering today's high interest rates and the high cost of protein, it may no longer be profitable to *winter steers on bluestem ranges*.

Another benefit of this new system is that it provides a close check on all cattle at regular intervals. It is easier to prowl one pasture of 300 cattle than three pastures of 100 cattle.

Author is President, Oklahoma Land and Cattle Company, Pawhuska, Oklahoma.



Yearling steers on the Oklahoma Land and Cattle Co. Ranch.

As for the extra time required for moving cattle, I'd rather have my cowboys moving cattle to improve the range and increase beef production, than have them busy doing something that makes no contribution to production.

Moving has to be done correctly because cattle that are stressed by frequent moves will not gain efficiently. There

are many ways of doing this that are common knowledge among good hands. Gates left open at the proper times, double gates for large herds, wing fences and feed trucks can all be handy. The cattle should be moved quietly and scattered in the new pasture for best results.

When adequate grass is available, continuous stocking usually gives best gains per head. However, with the increased numbers under this system you can produce 50 percent more beef per acre, improve the range, and get total uniform use of all forage.

A rancher grows only one crop and that is grass. He has to know that he must first increase his grass production before he can run more cattle.

The grass growing principles talked about in this article can help guarantee a profitable future for Oklahoma cattlemen and concurrently improve and stabilize our rangelands.

Editor's Comments About the Author: Dick Whetsell knows whereof he speaks. He is a long-time rancher and SRM member. At the Tulsa SRM annual meeting in 1981 he was awarded the prestigious Frederic G. Renner Award. The certificate read: "In recognition for his outstanding application of good range management for livestock production, private recreation, and improved wildlife habitat and for untiring efforts over many years in working with organizations, ranchers, and students in promoting better range management."

Designed to increase wildlife range.

If your management plan calls for supplemental watering to increase wildlife range, Spartan Tanks has the answer: The Spartan Wildlife Watering System.

The system combines a winged catchment for optimum water collection

with a remote, float-controlled watering basin that can be located up to 100 feet from the catchment.

Dozens of these systems are producing increased wildlife range in forests across the country.

For complete information, specifications and pricing, call or write

Spartan Tanks

Integrity • Strength • Endurance

Rio Rancho Industrial Park — P.O. Drawer 10190
Albuquerque, NM 87184 — (505) 892-0500
a division of Volcano Industries, Inc.

