

Giving/Getting Opportunities to Start a Grazing Operation

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Rock Hills Ranch is located in north central South Dakota. Four of my great grandparents homesteaded within 30 miles of our ranch headquarters. My wife Garnet and I are fortunate to have our son Luke, his wife Naomi, and four children ranching with us. There is hope for a sixth generation on the ranch. The transfer of our knowledge plus physical assets is something Garnet and I are passionate about. I have included a brief description of each below.

We like to tell people that when we got married 40 years ago, we had nothing, but after seven years, had less. Fortunately, since the mid 1980s we have been able to right the ship and accumulate some assets. Garnet and I have been blessed with two children. Our son returned to the ranch after graduating from college. Our daughter Kajsa attended college and moved to Tennessee upon graduation. Both are married and have produced six above-average grandchildren.

Luke has been fully engaged in the ranch since he joined it full time in 2006. In the beginning I made most of the day-to-day decisions on what we should be doing and how to do it. Today our roles are reversed, with Luke responsible for the execution of ranch work on a day-to-day basis and my role being one of advisor and assistant. We talk on a daily basis and decide what we should be doing and who will be doing it. My goal with Luke is for him to be comfortable running the ranch without his father's assistance. Kajsa and her family spend about a month per year at the ranch. We know it would not be fair to our son to give his sister an equal amount of our ranch, so we are using off-ranch assets to treat her fairly. Since Garnet and I own most of the ranch assets, we lease them to Luke and Naomi and work free of charge. The crop land is leased on a per acre basis and the pasture based on AUM's. The tractor leases are per hour, the cutting and raking equipment per acre, and the baler per bale. The cattle are leased on a percentage basis. We are paid in cash and livestock at the end of the year.

The second part of transition is sharing what we have learned. We made our fair share of mistakes and want both family and other young people to learn from them. One of the reasons we are willing to relinquish control now is to help Luke and his family learn while we are still able to give advice and assist in the day-to-day activities of the ranch. We also are in our fourth year of hosting a ranch intern. Our internships are from one to six months. The season-long interns are paid and do everything from range monitoring and herd health to all aspects of the haying operation and machine maintenance. We want to expose them to every part of what running a ranch is about. We also encourage educational opportunities. This year our intern will attend three ranch tours plus a grazing school. The one-month internships are unpaid, and geared toward giving the intern an overview of ranch life.

We post the internships online and have had over 100 applicants the last two years. Internship information can be found on our website at www.rockhillsranch.com.

What we are doing is not for every operation, but we feel the beginning of the transition process needs to start with the education and experience component. The next step for Garnet and me will be the transfer of the physical assets to the next generation.