

Gracie Creek Ranch grazing plan – historical and where we are now

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I have had a relationship with Gracie Creek ranch as a veterinarian since graduation in 1976 and as a management consultant since the mid-1990s. During that time, I have had the good fortune to become intimately aware of the day-to-day management challenges that an operation of this diversity and scale encompasses.

The business model of Gracie Creek Ranch has evolved greatly over the years. The Price family has its roots in the stocker business in New Mexico (Beef Magazine, September 2012, “Bob Price, Burwell, Ne, wins National Stocker Award”). From there, Bob’s father Jim ventured north to acquire a ranch in eastern Colorado and later added the ranch in the Nebraska sand hills near Burwell.

The business model for many years was to maintain a cow herd in Nebraska with calves wintered on a bunk ration after weaning in Nebraska and summered on the Colorado yearling operation. Additional calves were purchased to supplement those that were raised.

The Colorado ranch was sold in the late 1990s and the cow calf yearling operation was conducted entirely at the Nebraska ranch. The cows were then liquidated in 2004 and 2005 and the ranch has become entirely a purchased stocker program. The business model has almost gone full circle to how the family got started in New Mexico.

For many years, the calves were wintered on the Nebraska ranch on a total mixed ration fed in bunks on large lots. After the cows were sold in 2004 and 2005, the calf wintering program transitioned to a grazing program supplemented with distillers co-products.

The Nebraska ranch has always been managed in a year-round grazing system, but since 2005 the winter grazing is utilized by growing calves rather than dry pregnant cows.

The owned and leased land under management of Gracie Creek Ranch in Nebraska has also varied greatly over the years. Total acres peaked at about 39,000 acres in 173 pastures to the current 26,000 acres in 112 pastures. The livestock herd has transitioned from about 2800 cows with calves wintered on bunks and summered in Colorado, to 1500 cows with calves wintered on bunks and summered in Nebraska, to the current 3,000-4,000 purchased calves wintered and summered on grass.

One management challenge is to match the forage demand of the varying classes of cattle with the forage supply the land base is expected to provide in some sort of plan that also allows the manager to monitor the process in an effort to maintain good range health. There is no way a person can develop a year-round grazing plan of this size in the mind or on paper.

Excel spreadsheets were developed that did a fair job of developing a grazing plan, but they were cumbersome to construct and very difficult to modify when needed due to changes in current environmental conditions. A comprehensive computer database program called “The Grazing Manger” (TGM) was discovered in 1995 that has been a tremendous asset and is still utilized today. Other local producers have also added TGM to their management tool box (Chad Buell, 2012 Nebraska Grazing Conference, “Monitoring by the Numbers,” pages 8-13 of proceedings).

The Grazing Manager (TGM) was created by Dr. Mort Kothmann and Ray Hinnant to help managers deal with this complex decision environment. TGM gives managers like you the ability to test important decisions before making them and select which decisions work for you and your operation (Beef Magazine, "Grazing by Looking Forward," March 2013, pages 24-29). In addition to testing decisions, TGM helps managers make grazing plans and other management decisions. It also helps keep track of grazing resources and past management decisions. In all, TGM is a powerful management tool for grazing livestock producers, rangeland managers, and wildlife managers. And it is easy to use.

Few managers keep grazing records for their pastures, and even fewer use grazing records for planning and decision making. Calculations by hand are difficult and time consuming. Computers can help by providing a structure for collecting the correct data and they can calculate rapidly. This allows the manager cost-effective access to data that currently is not available. Most ranchers base their grazing management decisions on experience. They start with an estimate of carrying capacity, stock the pasture and monitor to see if it is correct. Because forage production varies so greatly across seasons and years, it is very difficult to apply management by experience alone.

The authors of TGM have developed this program primarily to be used by the ranch or land manager. Information required by the program is readily available and, through consistent use, the manager will gain even more knowledge about the operation. The program will help you learn grazing management concepts, organize and inventory your resources, develop goals and grazing plans to achieve those goals, and monitor your forage resource each year. They will also provide you with fast pasture survey techniques so that you can afford to spend time managing your forage resource.

In 2007 Agren of Carroll, Iowa partnered with the USDA Risk Management Agency to seek a decision-support tool to help ranchers address the potential for drought before it occurred. The three-year project began with a thorough examination of available drought-mitigation tools as well as consultation with ranchers and practitioners about what they wanted to see in such a tool. Once several options were selected, they presented their findings to an expert panel, which determined that "The Grazing Manager" (TGM), originally developed at Texas A&M University, was the most appropriate tool for the project.

Upon selection, TGM underwent intensive software revisions, testing, and evaluation by their staff and partners. They developed an integrated electronic environment for its use, and created a detailed User Guide and on-line help files to accompany the software.

Because of the USDA financial support, the software as well as the user guide is now public domain and available free of charge at www.thegrazingmanager.com.