

Gracie Creek Ranch Grazing Plan: Historical and Where We Are Now

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The Price Family history traces back to the 1916 family homestead in northeast New Mexico. Dee and Evlon Price stepped off the train from Texas with a dream to ranch, a suitcase and \$200, and initially lived in a half-dug-out and hauled water for their livestock during the early years. Through perseverance and determination, they were able to establish a family base in ranching. It required a very conservative approach with sound business decisions. The torch was passed to James D. and Joann Price following WWII. During this generation, expansion was pursued and risks were rewarded. Both individuals were able to adapt to changing circumstances.

Robert E. (Bob) Price assumed leadership in 1996. Both passion and determination to ranch along with emphasizing flexibility and adaptive management has allowed the operation to remain in the family. Bob's greatest contribution will probably be debt reduction and sustainable production practices.

The common threads for all three generations has been passion and taking care of the land. A strong resource base helps to ensure opportunities for future generations. The grazing management of the family has followed a traditional pattern. Early on, conventional year-round grazing was applied until approximately the late 1970s. Recognizing the need for rest, the family began simple rotational grazing during the late 1970s and early 1980s. During the mid 1980s, short-duration grazing was implemented to take advantage of stock density and longer rest periods to help minimize overgrazing and overresting. In recent years, a production goal of grazing standing forage year round and balancing people, livestock, land and wildlife with minimal harvested feed, takes us to where we are today. Optimizing production for both forage and cattle numbers has led to more flexibility and a more drought-tolerant landscape.



Stock Density at Work!

The *Drought of 2012*, and the current 2013 moisture deficit are still fresh on everyone's mind. A year-round grazing program, total deferment, and flexibility of a stocker program has allowed the Price Family to weather the *Drought of 2012* and keep its program in place for 2013. Allowing conservation stewardship to be compatible with agricultural production has remained as a solid part of the grazing philosophy. A positive indicator of range condition and range management has been cattle performance. After the summer of 2012, the grazing program adjusted for 25% less plant production for 2013 because of the drought during 2012. Numbers are approximately 15% less, and if adjustments need to be made, they can be made accordingly.

During the past 10 years, deferment has been enhanced by *totally* deferring a different portion of about 25% of the ranch during the growing season and up until a killing frost. Deferring a different portion of the ranch has strengthened root systems and allowed better gains and performance by allowing selectivity of grasses. During the dormant season approximately 60% of forage is harvested, and 40% during the growing season. The unharvested forage and litter prevent erosion and ensure a better water cycle. Due to deferment and planned grazing, a drought plan is always built into the system.

By beginning with the end in mind, the goal for the average daily gain during the winter months is 1 pound per head per day. The end is 900 pound steers by the end of June through early August. During 2012, winter gains were .98 pounds per head per day, and during 2013 the Price Family saw its best winter gains on record at 1.23 pounds per head per day.



Supplementing Vs. Feeding

During the summer of 2012, the average recorded weight of steers on sale date was 938 pounds. Despite challenges from the *Drought of 2012*, the Price Family saw its best performance in history and average summer daily gain was 2.33 pounds per head per day. So far for 2013, the average recorded weight of steers on sale date was 925 pounds. The goal for average summer daily gain is about 2 pounds per head per day; the family hopes to be right at the goal. It is calculated at the end of the summer after the rest of the cattle have been sold.

The Price Family has reduced the need for harvested feeds due to planned grazing and optimal production. The average amount of hay consumed by cattle during winter months during 2012 and 2013 was 2.24 pounds per head per day. From 2007-2013, it has been 2.56 pounds per head per day. An emergency supply is kept on hand for the worst-case scenario. As a result, 7,900 tons of hay have been sold during 2012 and 2013 due to planning and *kicking the hay habit*.

With the current 2013 moisture deficit and many challenges facing the beef industry at all levels, the Price Family continues to emphasize flexibility, which may be its greatest strength. The family is also fortunate to have young producers with a passion, and the 3rd generation as its greatest support base. Young ranch managers have a promising future due to the growing demand for food on a worldwide basis. Many ideas and concepts have been identified, according to Dr. Jim McGrann, to allow young managers to accomplish success. A systems approach and manager education are some of the key aspects for young managers today.



Summer Pasture, Gracie Creek Ranch

Although every cattle operation is unique, we can still learn from one another. A year-round grazing program with supplementation may be an attractive alternative to confined feeding with harvested feeds. Flexibility does not guarantee profitability, but it may present more opportunities to be profitable.