

EVALUATING GRAZING SYSTEM OPTIONS

Three Bar Cattle Co.

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The Three Bar Cattle Co. is a family-owned ranching operation 35 miles south of Nenzel, NE. This puts the ranch in the center of Cherry County. The family members on the ranch are: John and Cheryl; oldest son, Eric, and his wife, Shannon, and their children -- Jaylynn, Tyler, Elle, and Tucker; middle son, Kevin, his wife, Liz, and their daughters -- Kayleigh and Lilly. Our third son, Brant, is in Enid, OK at Air Force flight school along with his wife, Emily, and their daughters -- Caroline and Nora. We are fortunate to have part of our family close and involved in the operation.

There are two planning sessions that are very important to our operation. The financial planning is done before our fiscal year starts in January. We have a computer program into which we can put each month's projected income for the year. Then we put in the planned expense for each month. With the plan we can see before the year starts if what we want to do will be financially possible. If it is not, we can make adjustments. We put expenses in a little higher and the income a little more conservative. As the year goes by, we can monitor this plan to see how we are progressing and make necessary adjustments. It helps to make decisions on our inputs.

The planning we do that is more fun and easier to talk about is the grazing plan. We do a general grazing plan before the financial plan to get numbers of livestock for sale. The more detailed grazing plan is done before the growing season starts. There will be a plan for each herd in each cell. I will discuss each grazing cell.

We have been buying heifer calves weighing from 450 to 550. We have an order buyer that buys these calves starting in January. They will usually all be here by late March or early April. The heifers are spayed the last of April and start their grazing in the spayed heifer cell. This year there are 1200 heifers in this cell with 19 paddocks making up 8145 acres. The stocking rate is 6.78 acres per head, which equates to 19 animal days per acre for one day. The first time through the paddocks we manage our moves so we don't get back to where we started for at least 30 days. With the cool-season grass we think this works out well. The next time around we keep monitoring the re-growth and adjust our moves accordingly. The goal is to not get back to where we started before the grass that was grazed is recovered. This gives the grass a chance to build up root reserve and send out rhizomes. With the drought conditions this year, each paddock will only be grazed twice. For a wet year like last year, about half of the paddocks are grazed three times. The warm-season grass does grow in drought

conditions, but it is at a much slower rate. We like to give it at least a 90-day rest if possible; 100 to 120 days is better. Give it as much rest as possible.

This year the cow cell is made up of 28 paddocks. The total acres are 11,518. There are approximately 1000 cows and calves, which makes 11.5 acres per pair. If figured for 180 days, this leaves 15.6 animals on one acre for one day. The cows calve out in the paddocks starting May 1st. Depending on the grass conditions, they are usually weaned in November. There is a possibility that they could be weaned early this year. The cows are wintered in smaller herds. They are fed range grass and protein supplement in the winter program. In the last 25 years, hay had to be fed one year for a short period because of snow. We have had a history of buying our cows and using terminal cross bulls. The decision was made to start raising our own replacements. Last spring we started the first-calf heifers calving the 1st of April. The idea is to give them more time before they are bred back. The plan was to graze them in a separate three-paddock cell this summer, but due to the drought, they were co-mingled with the cow herd July 16th.

The ranch has a yearling meadow cell. This year there are 1299 acres included with 900 head. This is figured for 140 days, which makes a stocking rate of 1.4 acres per head, 97 head on one acre for one day. These are our home-raised yearlings. Included are some two-year-olds that will be harvested and marketed as grass fat.

This brings us to the replacement heifers. This year there were 300 head in this herd. They started out according to the plan, with seven paddocks of 2282 acres, 7.6 acres per head. This is an example of having to re-plan and make adjustments. Their water source consisted mostly of a creek, but the creek dried up as it does on real dry years. The adjustment that was made was moving the first-calf heifers in with the cows. This gave us 3685 more acres and four more paddocks with water. This changed our stocking rate to 12 acres per head, 14.6 head per acre per day.

Eric and Shannon have started a registered red Angus herd. As of right now there are 90 head in this group. They have five paddocks with a total of 1775 acres, 20 acres per head. We are flexible with this herd.

The ranch is haying the best parts of eight meadows with a total of 1000 acres. The hay production so far has been around 1/3 of last year. It looks like we will end up with around 500 bales. We had 1100 bales left from last year. If we have a winter like we have been having, this should get us through.

I should also mention that we have a 130-acre center pivot with grass alfalfa mixture. Also, we have a New Zealand K-line irrigation system irrigating 200 acres. Five of the meadows

were grazed the last of April; this along with the late frost and limited moisture have caused lower hay production.