

Center for Grassland Studies Alumni Update

Ben Andrews, Cattle Rancher

Ben Andrews was one of our first students enrolled in the Grazing Livestock Systems (GLS) degree program. Since his graduation in 2004, Ben has held a variety of positions that have taken him from Nebraska to North Carolina and back. After graduation, he worked for six months as a large animal veterinary assistant in the heart of Nebraska cattle country. Working with multiple producers through their calving and breeding seasons solidified Ben's thinking of prevention over reaction.

As a herdsman for Flying H Genetics in Arapahoe, NE in 2005, Ben continued to learn multiple aspects of ranching and seedstock production. Within six months of his arrival at Flying H Genetics, they asked him to head to North Carolina. No, they weren't trying to get rid of him, they wanted Ben to help start a new satellite unit in Biscoe, NC. There, Ben met two individuals who helped him define and become a true ranch manager; Mr. Bill Sleigh and Mr. Bobby Myric.

Mr. Sleigh, like Ben, did not have a family operation to which he could return, but he had established himself as a premier and upcoming manager within the beef industry. Mr. Sleigh taught Ben to listen and always continue to learn. Additionally, Mr. Sleigh suggested Ben surround himself with folks who are stronger in the areas where he is weakest, work his tail off, and treat each operation as if it was his own.

Mr. Bobby Myric, owner/operator of JBOB Farms, was like a grandpa to Ben as he showed, through example, what one can build through hard work and perseverance. As a leader in the development of Balancer cattle, Mr. Myric instilled upon Ben the need for moderate-framed, maternally efficient cows that are developed on grass with minimal supplementation. Ben indicated there was a learning curve involved with managing cattle in North Carolina; different grasses and fertilizer schedules that affected stocking rates, regulations regarding water usage, and a different clientele and customer base. Also, there were far more cattle in that part of the country than he ever imagined. In fact, Ben now recommends that students should tour the country and study the various geographical regions of the beef industry as it'll surprise and open students' eyes to new opportunities.

In 2008, Ben was offered the opportunity to return to Nebraska to start and build a grass-based, maternally-oriented Angus seedstock operation. The operation, Spring Valley Ranch in Rose, NE, selected for and marketed cattle designed to thrive on the native range of the Nebraska Sandhills.

Ben married Sherry in 2009. Sherry is an intricate part of their operation; she does everything from keeping the books to working the cows. Ben indicates they are a team as they work side by side, every day of the year. Still, as a ranch manager, Ben indicates that balancing personal and
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Ben Andrews

business life is his greatest challenge. He's got the desire to succeed and create an elite operation, but that takes time. Ben said, "I need to remind myself to take some time off to relax and enjoy family as well." He also indicated that it can be challenging working with owners, investors, and employees. However, Ben mentioned, "As long as you stay open, be honest and fair, and keep everyone in the loop, relationships are easier to maintain and manage."

In visiting with Ben, it's obvious that he is passionate about the beef industry and grazing management. He enjoys building a seedstock operation and cowherd his own way, and delivering a product to commercial producers that he believes in; the generation of sustainable and profitable mother cows that perform on grass.

As a student Ben participated in the Ranch Practicum, and he encourages current students to take advantage of this opportunity. Being able to converse with producers, see the results of research, and the various cycles on the ranch were valuable. A capstone course allowed him to develop a ranch plan, which was beneficial as it allowed him to put his own ideas and goals onto a piece of paper.

According to Ben, "It's the relationships that you build with people. Plus, studying the data, thinking outside the box, and pushing the boundaries with this major is what probably influenced me the most." Ben says, "Don't be afraid to fail and do things that get you out of your comfort zone. Converse and bounce ideas off of as many people as you can while you're at UNL." The GLS degree program provides an opportunity to do this through their internship program. Ben believes it is a valuable experience and actually suggests that students consider longer-term internships; from six to twelve months. Given the expense, he encourages all students to take advantage of all that is offered by the University.

At the same time, Ben now offers suggestions for improvement of the GLS program. He wishes he had spent more time learning about budgets and expense reports, learning how to prepare loan statements, and having a better understanding of factors that affect the market.

Ben's overall advice for prospective and current students is to, "Meet and talk to anyone and everyone...professors, business professionals, ranchers, feed salesmen, technicians, and others." He recommends that students get involved with one of the judging teams, if possible; anything that requires students to take a position and have to explain that position to others. "With this business, you're defending and explaining yourself all the time; to bankers, allied businesses, ranch owners, and customers."

Finally, Ben suggests that we, "Become a master of observation because the stock, wildlife, range, people, and markets are your best tools to see what has happened, is happening, and will happen...from mineral imbalances showing up in the hair coat to changes in animal behavior that indicate an upcoming storm. Nature will show us what is needed, if we take the time to observe her."