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Protecting Water has Livestock Benefits

By Mark Parker

McPherson, Kansas - Reducing the impact livestock have on Kansas water resources is one of those rare Good News-Good News scenarios.

The good news is that keeping the cows out of the water is extremely effective in maintaining and enhancing water quality. The other good news is that many of the practices used to achieve that goal are also good for beef producers' bottom lines.

Speaking to a large crowd of about 150 cattlemen at the Kansas Graziers Association's Winter Conference recently in McPherson, Kan., Kansas State University Watershed Specialist Herschel George outlined the issue:

"The problem is that when the cattle drink from the stream, they don't just drink," he said, pointing out that *E. coli* issues arise as well as sediment from increased bank erosion.

Cattlemen, however, have a full toolbox of ways to address that situation.

Limited access to streams and ponds, spring development, solar pumps and remote water containers such as covered concrete waterers and tire tanks offer opportunities for stockmen. George noted that simply adding a water trough to a pasture that includes a stream reduces the amount of time cattle spend using the stream itself by 80 percent. It also cuts the time they spend in riparian areas by 56 percent and eliminates about 77 percent of bank erosion.

Emphasizing that each farm and ranch presents unique challenges and opportunities, George said that expertise is available to help livestock producers identify the most effective ways of protecting water quality in a manner that also benefits livestock.

K-State Watershed Specialist Will Boyer discussed some of the best management practices that have the dual benefit of protecting water quality and enhancing beef production. Rolling out hay away from water resources, rather than repeatedly using big round bale feeding sites, prevents the buildup of manure that can run-off into water supplies. It can result in less hay waste and less crowding as well as reducing health issues such as calf scours. Concentrated feeding areas, Boyer said, can also reduce gain potential because of muddy conditions and those hay feeding sites can lead to increased fly populations later in the season.

Boyer urged producers to move shelters, water supplies and feeding sites away from streams to protect the water as well as to improve grazing distribution. He told the crowd that there is plenty of opportunity for innovation and suggested they begin by establishing goals for what they want to accomplish.

Help with achieving those goals are available from several sources. Technical expertise is available from Kansas State University watershed specialists like George and Boyer who can be contacted by email at hgeorge@ksu.edu and wboyer@ksu.edu, respectively. The Kansas Rural Center's Clean Water Farms Project offers assistance and most county conservation districts have funds to develop alternate water resources. More information on the Kansas Rural Center's Clean Water Farms Project is available at their web site: www.kansasruralcenter.org.

The KGA Winter Conference was co-sponsored by the Kansas Rural Center, Kansas Farmers Union, the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition.

The Kansas Graziers Association is a grassroots organization that promotes sustainable grazing practices. For more information, contact Mary Howell by calling 785-562-8726.