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Nature provides pasture strategy worth copying
By Mark Parker

The way Oren Long sees it, the native prairie is a pretty darn good model for tame pasture management. The Valley Falls, Kan., farmer has developed a self-generating, self-regulating system that lets "Mother Nature and the cows do the work and you do the thinking."

Long and his wife, Vera, hosted a pasture tour of their farm recently and Long shared his philosophy as well as his management strategy with a good crowd of area farmers and landowners.

It begins, he told the group, with plant diversity. Fescue and red clover are the primary species in Long's system but that forage base is bolstered with brome, sweet clover, orchardgrass, alfalfa, lespedeza and others — including some weeds.

"A weed is just a plant that's out of place," he said. "We prevent weeds from going to seed with mowing but we also realize that there are 'weeds' that the cattle get a lot of good out of. Ragweed, bindweed — a lot of plants have a high nutrient content at certain stages of growth so while we control them, we also take advantage of them. The fescue and the red clover will out-grow the weeds until mid-summer if your stand is good and you have some natural fertility in the soil."

And if you want to know which plant species are most desirable out there in the pasture, Long's advice was simple. "Just watch the cows," he said. "They'll tell you what's good and what isn't."

Red clover plays a pivotal role in the pasture plant community, Long said, by providing nitrogen for the soil as well as nutrition for the cattle which are owned and managed by his grandson, Brandon Hetherington. A good red clover stand can provide 100-150 pounds of free nitrogen annually and Long manages grazing to ensure legume persistence. Splitting the farm in two, red clover on half the farm is allowed to go to seed while the paddocks on the other half are grazed. The cattle are then moved so legumes on the remaining half of the farm can mature.

"By allowing the red clover to go to seed each year, we always have new plants coming the following year," Long explained. "That helps maintain the fertility and the plant diversity we want."

Another important component of Long's pasture plan is his design to extend the grazing system. Along with nitrogen fertilizer, hay is a major input expense that the veteran grazier aims to minimize. Rotational grazing, he explained, helps keep the forage species growing and in a vegetative state in addition to prolonging optimum grazing time.

The biggest factor, however, is stockpiling standing forage. Through his own experimentation, Long has found that mowing pastures in mid-August at a height of four to six inches results in the best combination

of weed control and regrowth forage quality and quantity. The resulting mulch, he said, also helps build soil fertility. Selected pastures are deferred from grazing for 60-75 days, depending on conditions and need. The result is high-quality new-growth fescue that dramatically reduces the need for winter hay.

Although any forage can be stockpiled, fescue is particularly suited for deferred grazing because it has good autumn growth, resists weathering and has a high concentration of soluble carbohydrates in the fall. Long also observed that stockpiled fescue is higher in total digestible nutrients (TDN) and crude protein (CP) than most of the hay beef cows receive in the winter. Allowing the cows to harvest the standing forage saves labor as well as money.

"And," Long added, "I wouldn't even get too worried about snow cover. Cows can graze through a lot of snow and it's rare that we would get enough snow in this part of the world to prevent them from grazing. Actually, mud is much more of a winter-time problem because the cows can tear up the stand — we keep that in mind when we select winter pastures."

The Long farm consists of two pieces of ground, a 110-acre farm he and Vera purchased in 1960, and another quarter section they added in 1970. The first was historically a grass farm and the second had been row-cropped. The higher productivity of the original land has made Long a firm believer in the importance of organic matter.

"The most valuable lesson I've learned is the value of organic matter," he asserted. "It provides natural fertility and that's one of the reasons I prefer grazing to feeding hay — haying removes organic matter and depletes nutrient reserves. It also removes the cover that protects the soil and conserves moisture. Organic matter supplies the food and energy for almost all soil life."

Dedicated to the health and sustainability of his farm, Long views each field as a unique ecosystem and manages it according to its needs. One particular hilltop area, for example, was highly eroded when it came under his stewardship. He planted burr oaks on the land to help sequester carbon and he controls grazing to help rebuild the soil.

The tour was sponsored by the Kansas Rural Center along with the Jackson County Conservation District, the Jefferson County Conservation District, the Lower Kansas River WRAPS (Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy) and the Delaware River WRAPS.

The Kansas Rural Center is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting and enhancing an economically viable, environmentally sound and socially sustainable agriculture through public policy and educational efforts. For more information on the Kansas Rural Center and the resources it offers farm families and their communities, log onto the Center's web site: www.kansasruralcenter.org

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