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Grazing cattle best for pastures, water quality and calf health

By Tom Parker

Belleville, Ks. - Dale Kirkham believes that the quality of air, water, grasslands, pastures and cattle would improve if more ranchers adopted a keep-it-simple attitude and returned to the basics. The basics in this case being an elementary law of bovine anatomy: cows have legs. Four of them, to be exact, and cows, as well as everything associated with cows, are better off when those four legs are moving.

Kirkham, a Kansas Rural Center field organizer from Eureka, backed up his belief with examples and statistics during a presentation on cattle and pasture management at the Treasure Tree in Belleville, on Monday, September 19. The workshop, sponsored by the Milford WRAPS and the Kansas Rural Center, included other experts such as Dr. Larry Hollis, K-State beef production medicine specialist, and Will Boyer, K-State watershed specialist. About 25 people attended.

His advice—and the subject of his topic, “Cows have four legs and a rumen for a reason”—was to make cattle do the work of staying healthy, and while they’re at it they’ll keep pastures healthy, too. But it takes planning, a change of attitude, and a clear picture of the lay of the land. “Cows are like kids waiting for their parents to come home and feed them cookies and milk,” he said. “They’re creatures of habit. And they’ll sit around waiting for a handout.”

Given the opportunity, cattle will bunch together, he said. When cattle loiter beneath shade trees near stream banks on sweltering afternoons or on downward slopes, livestock waste carries into creeks to pollute downstream resources. At winter feeders, waste accumulates underfoot to create biological laboratories for unwanted pathogens. When proper site management is added to the mix, both scenarios could be alleviated by simply making cattle do what they do best: graze.

“I want them to be grazers, first, last and always,” he said. “Keep them spread out.”

This includes using rotating pastures, restricting transportation corridors where erosion is prevalent, locating mineral and salt feeders at corners of pastures where grazing normally doesn't occur, providing minimal amounts of hay when needed and rolling out hay for supplemental feeding. Dr. Hollis agreed. "It's an equal-opportunity feeding system," he quipped. "It can be done anywhere and changed daily. They're working instead of you."

Kirkham showed a slide of a bale-wide strip of short grass bisecting a pasture of much taller grass. Cattle following rolled-out hay tend to crop underlying grasses while providing nutrients to the soil, Kirkham said. "I think of manure as minerals," he said. "It includes nitrogen, potassium and phosphate. And if you include a little cracked corn in the feed, birds will break up the cow patties for you."

Letting cattle crop native grasslands also reduces the necessity for burning. "Burning is contagious," he said. "We sometimes do it because our neighbor is doing it. We need to ask ourselves if it will have a positive impact, such as cleaning out cedars. If not, let's reconsider."

Reducing or preventing cattle congregating on calving grounds is crucial for healthy newborns, Dr. Hollis said. When cattle are spread throughout a pasture rather than bunched together, calves are born into more sterile environments. While it's hardly the same as having them delivered at the local regional hospital, steps can be taken to alleviate some of the contamination associated with grazers—excrement.

"Anyone see a problem with that?" He pointed to a photograph of a newborn calf lying on a carpet of manure-splattered hay. "It's like calving into a toilet," he said.

Unless calving is spread out over a wide area, disease can build up over time on calving grounds. The number one neonatal disease responsible for calf deaths is scours, he said, which can most often be traced back to the soil.

Simple methods can minimize or even eradicate the problem. Hollis recommended the Sandhills Calving System, a methodology developed in the Sandhills region of Nebraska, where formerly during calving season it wasn't unusual for clinics to be staffed with 50 veterinarians, and even then ranchers frequently lost five percent or more of their newborns.

The system is based upon separating cattle through a series of pastures depending on calving cycles. Once a set of calves is born, other cattle are moved to the next pasture in a sequential alignment that assures that newborns are kept separate. "Newborn calves are never left in the presence of older calves," Hollis said. "Older calves can serve as disease amplifiers, and are the biggest source of infection for calves born later in the season." The system has been proven to reduce or eliminate scours, and when an outbreak does occur, it minimizes the number of calves affected.

Hollis concurred with Kirkham that cattle are often overfed and pampered. By reducing the amount of hay used as supplemental feeding, excess stores could be turned into another kind of green by supplying drought-

stricken ranchers to the south. “People are crying for it, and they’re paying large sums of money for it,” Hollis said. “It’s a high price commodity.”

A sure way of telling if you’re feeding too much hay is if any remains after two hours. If it does, you’re feeding too much, he said. He showed an image of a cow nestled cozily inside a bale feeder. “That,” he said dryly, “is too much cow comfort for my tastes.”

It goes back to the idea of grazing and Kirkham’s theory. Hollis pointed to a photograph of a broad field of native prairie stretching to the horizon. The russet and tawny grass was deep and lush and kissed by a winter sun. “Everything,” Hollis said, “works better out here.”

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Tom Parker is a free lance writer from Blue Rapids, who provided this article for the Kansas Rural Center.