

New rules on the range

Long-term drought drives need for planning



William Payne Jr., owner of the Destiny Ranch in St. Louis, Okla., uses high-intensity grazing to manage his cattle herd and reduce drought stress.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRYAN M. RICHTER AND BRENT FUCHS

BY SARAH TERRY-COBO
THE JOURNAL RECORD

OKLAHOMA CITY – Drought and the poor economy drove cattle ranchers William and Karen Payne from their Beaver County farm in the 1970s and subsequently to Colorado. In 2006, they returned to ranching and Oklahoma, buying a property in St. Louis, about 25 miles south of Shawnee. Since then, despite years of parched conditions, they are making their operation work.

Like many who depend on the earth's resources and the variable climate to make a living, the Paynes have learned to work with the land. If they want to treat their cattle well, they must treat the land well, too, William Payne said. The possibility of the drought lasting several decades, not merely a few years, is sobering.

It reinforces the need for careful and meticulous planning on Destiny Ranch, where the Paynes live and raise stocking cattle.

The couple were among about 100 people, including ranchers, students and professors, at the second installment of a four-part educational series presented by the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum on Friday. The museum is hosting the series, "Surviving the Elements: Land & Water Issues of the West," to improve conservation and stewardship.

William Payne said knowledge gained from the day's speakers, including a climatologist, an economist and a rangeland manager, will help them better manage their business. The Paynes use a method

known as high-intensity grazing, in which cattle are fenced off in small plots and moved frequently, sometimes every day.

This can prevent overgrazing, which can damage grasslands and prevent forage from recovering for years at a time.

Patrick Reece, a former consultant with the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said ranchers can't understand proper rangeland management until they've experienced a few droughts, not just a single year. His research focuses on the Great Plains area, from Texas to Canada. Solutions for ranchers can vary widely, in part because temperatures and precipitation rates can vary dramatically from north to south and east to west, even in a single state.

The most important thing is to develop a drought plan, Reece said. The plan must include management decisions before, during and after the drought years, he said. As part of his research with the university, he traveled across the Great Plains. Many farmers told him that by the time the drought ended, they were out of land, livestock and cash.

"If you don't make the decision to de-stock (cattle), you will be out of business," Reece said. "It's fair to say, if you don't have a drought plan, you may very well suffer from management paralysis."

Reece said ranchers must decide when and where to move their livestock, so the animals don't eat too much forage during critical plant growth times, or to the point where plants can't recover in subsequent years. Reducing the number of livestock is one way to minimize stress on the grasslands.

For the Paynes, Destiny Ranch has had plenty of moisture in recent years. Since they removed cedar and post oak trees, water actually runs off the land. When the trees were there, the soil was dry. They have been able to stockpile forage, so they recently purchased 100 head of cattle to help eat it and better manage the tallgrass.

However, William Payne said had they heard some of Friday's speeches one month ago, they would've made different planning decisions. They might have waited one year before they purchased the 100 cattle, or only purchased 50 cattle. They might have rotated 200 stocker cows instead of the usual 300 stocker cows.

On Destiny Ranch, they manage their operations differently than their neighbors, who have full-time jobs outside of raising cattle.

"We manage our forage not because of the weather or the rain," William Payne said. "We manage for quality (forage), not quantity. We allow a longer season for regrowth."

They partner with the Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation, an Ardmore-based nonprofit dedicated to advancing agricultural science. Studies of the Paynes' rangeland management show that their technique creates forage with 10- to 12-percent protein. In comparison, forage from shorter growing cycles produces 2- to 3-percent protein content, which requires adding commodity feed and increases costs.

"We eat, sleep and drink with our cows," he said. "They are our livelihood. We get a check when we sell cattle."