

The Value of Soil Health, and Grazing Management

To survive and grow a cattle operation and reduce inputs

Looking out on the pastureland of their ranch, William and Karen Payne believe they selected the perfect name for their home – **Destiny Ranch**.

In September 2006 we purchased the 920 acre ranch located at Saint Louis Oklahoma and relocated our ranching enterprise to what is now referred to as Destiny Ranch. The ranch plan primarily was to be a stocker cattle operation purchasing truck load lots of 80-100 head per month with rotations of cattle every 90 days.

However before we continue we must mention the land wasn't much but was affordable and many who viewed the land couldn't actually place any type of potential animal operation due to the conditions of the land. It was overgrown with trees, severely overgrazed with continuous grazing, ponds were destroyed from cattle trails plus several organizations couldn't even identify what types of grasses might possibly grow here.

Destiny Ranch in 13 years has evolved into a high intensity grazing enterprise which maintains 300 head of stocker cattle year around with annual marketing of around 1000 head per year. Plus a 169 head cow calf operation which is the Destiny Ranch beef supply chain for the retail beef sales which will process 72 head this year to sell at the local retail markets. In short we have become highly diversified into all aspects of the cattle industry, cow calf, breeding heifers and bulls, stocker, finished cattle, and retail meat sales.

Now we are ready for the real story, and a greater challenge **The Forage**

We are a forage based ranch and If you have some of these things called cattle we certainly have great challenge in caring and feeding them in all weather conditions and the 4 weather season. Feeding commodity grains, protein cubes, feeding hay or simply letting them survive on their own. However this last option is certainly not a viable selection if your living is made from raising cattle. Not all grasses are equal and certainly not all grasses maintain the level of nutrients to maintain the cow and calf, stocker cattle and certainly the feeder cattle enterprises we have.



It is quite nostalgic to be called a rancher in this modern era whether we have 10 acres or 4,000 acres. But here at Destiny Ranch we sometimes call ourselves grass farmers because without our constant attention to the grass we could not have the 169 head cow herd or the stocker cattle operation on a 900 acre ranch which only 640 acres are used for the entire cattle operation.

We get a lot of questions each year ranging from how do we keep cattle in with a single electric wire, why don't you cut any hay, and this question, how do we maintain our cattle while waiting for the grasses to start growing in the spring. Each year from our spring seminars or fall gatherings we get a lot of questions and it's like magic at times trying to explain how we work. However it is not magic, we concentrated on making the soils better and the forage got better with each year.

To maintain our cattle in the spring it is called reserve forage from the year before. Here at Destiny Ranch we rely on our reserve forage throughout the winter into the spring. These reserve or dormant forages keep the ground insulated and protected. Then in February and March we start to see the young green sprouts of the cool season grasses. The photo below is of the dormant grasses with the cool season grasses. These early season forages need to grow in the spring to 8-12 inches before grazing. This is a hard task to complete and take a lot of discipline, we all want to get it early, but waiting only two weeks in some cases will really jump start a pasture with a lot of grazing and no input.



Grazing is like magic in some regards. If you eat it down to the ground good chance the plant will be stressed and not grow back for 90-100 days or have to compete with weeds, most importantly you still need to feed the cattle. If you eat off 1/2 the plant (one bite and move) there is a good chance to come back and graze this area again. Here at Destiny Ranch we start moving cattle faster as the grasses start growing and this is a vital management task. It is important after grazing the winter grasses and getting the dormant grasses grazed we let the Native grasses grow to maximum height before grazing. Wow this sounds complicated but in reality it is quite simple. The native grasses in the spring need approximately 45-60 days to reach full maturity and of course we are going to graze them before they get to full maturity so we know in mid to late April we are in full grazing mode.

Or sometimes called grass harvest time. This is the time frame for really managing the grasses and forage production until approximately July 1. We all know with Mother Nature seasons change and so will the ground temperatures and growing season so it is important to walk out in those fields to scout what is growing and when to start moving those cattle.

This is the most important date I would stress (July 1) simply due to the nutrients in the native forages start to fall dramatically after this date. The second issue to remember is from July 1 we are normally very hot and dry in central Oklahoma and if the forages have been grazed properly then we can continue to grow a lot of forage during the heat of July, August and September. Remember these are the months to grow that reserve forage that will get us thru the winter and back to the spring green up.

What about the rest of summer? This is some more of the magic with cattle they do like to eat every day all year long. Remember those early grazed pastures (April, May, June), those that were grazed first, those pastures in July and forward will be the fall forage. Those grazed in July, Aug, part of Sept become the reserve forage for the winter. Keeping a good set of records and following the grasses sounds complicated but in reality is quite simple and ensures we have sufficient forage each year.



Having a good plan and following the plan can certainly assist with the summer, fall and winter forages

Conservationists at heart, we treasure the land and our quiet way of life. We fenced off the ponds, installed pasture water systems, do not allow cattle to graze the ravines and work to keep wildlife on the ranch at all times. We take care of the land the land takes care of us.

Destiny Ranch is highly involved with teaching and demonstrating to others the importance and value of grazing management and holds seminars at the ranch each year. William and Karen are members of the Oklahoma cattlemen association, William is the president of the Pottowattomie cattlemen plus the south central district representative for the Oklahoma cattleman association. William and Karen are also members of the Noble Foundation strategic planning for grazing lands, Noble Foundation strategic planning for Stocker cattle and the Oklahoma Grazing Lands Coalition.

Destiny Ranch has been featured in articles with Kubota Great Plains Magazine, Noble Foundation Magazine, Oklahoma Cattlemens magazine, The Livestock Weekly from San Angelo Texas, and the Record Journal from Oklahoma City. In addition we were recognized as the Agribusiness of the year for Pottowattomie County and Shawnee Oklahoma.

Until next time keep those cattle moving and Happy Grazing.