

# The Ranch with a Successful Plan

By: Sennon Wallace

Representing the Colorado Section of the Society for Range Management

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## **Abstract:**

The Brett Gray Ranch has an interesting history that has made it quite unique. Not only that, but the form of rotational grazing being implemented has given way to a large amount of product. Yet none of the ranches success could have been possible without three goals and the management of Louis Martin.

## **Introduction**

On December 12, 2017, I visited a ranch in Colorado named the Brett Gray Ranch. I was curious as to how this ranch has become so notable and as to how its grazing strategy was such a success. This ranch has been striving for excellence for the last ten years. In order to describe what “plan” the ranch has; its establishment/history, and management goals must first be explained. Then with this knowledge, the “plan”, otherwise known as the type of grazing they use, will be described. Knowing their grazing strategy, will lead to why the Brett Gray Ranch is doing so well. The last point discusses what they are doing to implement grazing management.

## **History of Ownership**

The Brett Gray Ranch is located east of Colorado Springs in Lincoln County, Colorado. It

consists of 50,000 acres and was established by the Colorado State Land Board (CSLB) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in March 2007 (“Round River Resource Management”, 2017). The ranch has an interesting history dating back to 1873. One of the previous owners were the Douglas Brothers, wealthy brothers from the eastern US. They were very successful until the Great Depression of the early 1930s caused them to lose the ranch. Later on around 1938, a man named Brett Gray bought the ranch. He was a well respected man that managed the ranch for ten years before passing away. The Smith family took over the ranch all the while managing two other ranches, one in Montana and the other in Kansas. In the early 2000s, the Smith family lost the ranch due to financial problems. In order to prevent breaking up the Brett Gray Ranch, the Nature Conservancy purchased the property. Currently the Colorado State Land Board (CSLB) owns the ranch. Since 2008, it has been managed by the Round River Resource Management, LLC. The manager’s name is Louis Martin, whom I had the pleasure of meeting on my visit to the ranch (Martin, 2017).

### **Management Goals**

The ranch has three goals that they hope to accomplish through management of this property; (1) manage and improve the rangeland ecosystem, (2) provide professional livestock management services, and (3) offer internships/opportunities for young people in the discipline of range management. A specific management objective is to protect and preserve some of Colorado’s undeveloped prairies. Another objective is to help conserve the habitat of a variety of wildlife species living in Eastern Colorado as well as bird nesting sites. In general terms, regarding his management philosophy, Louis Martin had said, “We want to be unique and challenge the status quo.” (Martin, 2017) (Berlinger, 2017).

## **Grazing Management**

### **General Concepts**

The grazing on the ranch is managed using a holistic strategy (Martin, 2017). This includes the biological grazing planning using a detailed grazing planning chart. Lewis is well-informed on the concept of holistic management due to his management experience and attending schools and workshops. Stocking and movement of livestock is based on decisions tested through a holistic planning approach (Berlinger, 2017). A short duration grazing program is followed over the entire ranch using multiple pastures (approximately 50 pastures currently). Grazing periods vary from a few days to about one week, with planned recovery periods of three to four months or longer during dry years. A few different herds are run on the ranch, with one herd being allowed to graze within a specific set of pastures each year.

### **“The Plan”**

The Steel Fork creek flows through the ranch providing a significant area for wet meadows. Historically these areas were abused due to season-long overgrazing. Recently the ranch has implemented the planned tool of ultra-high stock density, also called mob grazing, to accelerate the improvement of these wet areas and adjacent uplands.

Mob grazing is basically an extreme form of rotational grazing. It is where very high numbers of cattle are grazed in small sections of land for very short periods of time, and allowing very long recovery periods. Some benefits of this form of grazing in comparison to continuous grazing is: more beef production per acre, increased litter cover on the soil surface, and reduced

bare ground. This results in improved soil health, more plant diversity, and improved nutrient and water cycling on the land. However, some of these benefits have been contested by some authors (Helzer, 2011).

### **Positive Aspects of “The Plan”**

Many ranchers who mob graze say that it is a very good method of improve soil every year and to obtain a wider variety of plants that crowd out unwanted weeds. Louis explained that some benefits he had seen included: a greater amount of diverse plants, reduced runoff with less sediment reaching the creek, and more moisture going into the soil causing the “green areas” to expand. In order to have the best outcome of mob grazing the ranchers have to be able to maintain the right time to move the cattle. If they are not moved at a correct time negative effects may occur to the plants and structure of the soil especially in wet areas.

### **Negative Aspects of “The Plan”**

There is a downside of mob grazing, however, that may be worth it for the final outcome. It is much more work having to constantly move the herd to another section of land. Other disputed aspects include soil organic matter, impacts on weeds, and grass health (Helzer, 2011). Regardless of the downsides, the beneficial outcomes are readily apparent on the Brett Gray Ranch!

### **Implementation**

In order to experience the great outcome of mob grazing Louis Martin had to implement a few things. First off he needed to install several miles of livestock water pipelines as well as several stock tanks to supply adequate water; however the livestock also receive water from creeks and springs supplied on the rangeland. Louis informed me that in 2012 they had a total of

4.5 inches of rainfall and that it was less than the recorded 4.8 inches in 1938 during the Dust Bowl. The average rainfall they receive is between 10 and 12 inches. Then he installed permanent power fencing to divide large pastures. He also uses temporary electric fencing to subdivide pastures to apply the tool of higher stock densities on certain pastures. The main objective when implementing mob grazing for the Brett Gray Ranch was to accelerate the improvement of wetlands that were abused because of overgrazing. Stock densities approaching 200,000 lbs per acre of live animal weight have been achieved. However, the highest stock density they have achieved thus far was around 582,000 pounds per acre of live animal weight (Martin, 2017). The results of mob grazing on the ranch are quite impressive and further monitoring will be carried out to ensure that the ranch remains successful (Berlinger, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The Brett Gray Ranch has become a prominent supporter of good rangeland stewardship, livestock management, and outreach to young people interested in learning about agriculture. Based on outcomes, mob grazing is benefiting the land. The ranch demonstrates great success using this tool. This has been an educational journey of learning about rangeland management and, the grazing strategy being implemented on the ranch. In my opinion, the Brett Gray Ranch truly has a successful plan!

## Works Cited

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