RANCHING IN SYNC WITH NATURE

Cotopaxi, Colorado

We are located at the north end of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in south-central Colorado. Our ranch is divided into two distinct units—summer and winter. The summer range lies best and along two 13,000-foot peaks and extends down to our irrigated meadows that lie next to our headquarters. The summer pastures are where most of the action happens on the ranch. Our cows have their calves here.

Grassfed Beef

It’s also where we develop and finish our grass fed animals utilizing the high quality forages that grow on our irrigated and sub-irrigated meadows—sedges, alfalfa, clovers, timothy, orchard grass, meadow bromes and other forages. In late summer we use the upper reaches of the ranch where the next year’s cycle begins with the introduction of carefully selected bulls to our cow herd. We use a combination of temporary and permanent electric fencing to control the timing and duration of grazing—dividing the upper unit into as many as 100 pastures.

The winter pastures lie to the north and at a much lower elevation. The landscape flows down through many ripaps and holds in the croayy outcrops reaching to the Arkansas River—our northern boundary. On the lower range, we rotate through a 10-pasture system which is a mix of federal and private land. Mountain mahogany, willow plums, dogrose bushes, prickly pear cactus, cholla, and many forbs along with grasses such as blue grass, sand dropseed, western wheatgrass, and Indian ricegrass make up a smorgasbord of nutrition for our cows to eat. Since we calve in the summer, we can run our calves with their mothers during the winter months. The mother cows teach the calves what plants to eat, where the water holes are, and where to hole out during a snowstorm.

For us, it all fits together into the whole of what we are trying to accomplish with our ranch business—conservation practices in hopes that future generations will inherit a healthier earth.

Our Story

Our ranch has been in the family more than 70 years. But our history goes back even farther when Nancy’s great-grandparents ranched along Texas Creek about 10 miles away in the late 1800s. In 1959, we went into business for ourselves with the purchase of 24 bred heifers and ran Dad’s cattle on shares, eventually buying his interest in the operation.

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Conserving the Land and Grass

Conserving the land and the grass our animals eat is of primary importance to us. In fact, we are grass farmers as much as we are beef growers. We think of the grass we grow as millions of little solar collectors doing the job of turning the sun’s energy into food for people. We harvest the sun, so it’s the utmost importance to keep our grass healthy and thriving from the soil up.

Why do we care about healthy grass, you might ask? Well, we are what our animals eat. Eating nutrient-dense meat from animals who have been raised on vibrant plants and soils pass those healthy benefits on to the humans who consume it. Healthy grass and soils create a diet rich in higher levels of Omega-3s and conjugated linoleic acid—both of which contribute to human health.

From the Soil Up

Healthy grass begins with the soil. In the same way grass grows millions of little solar collectors, the soil holds trillions of microbes that create a balanced ecosystem where plants thrive. Healthy soil captures and stores carbon and the higher the carbon content (soil organic matter), the more moisture is retained. By using a system of rotational grazing, we balance grazing with periods of rest to allow the grass to adequately recover. By leaving a stand of grass in the pasture, we can insure the plants will have plenty of leaf left for collecting more sunlight, putting down healthy roots, and regenerating healthy soils. Healthy soil is like a sponge with small pores for collecting and holding moisture, so the benefits of a healthy grass and soil ecosystem go beyond the immediate goal of producing food. According to the CeeWeb for collecting and holding moisture, so the benefits of a healthy grass and soil ecosystem go beyond the immediate goal of producing food.

Tactics to Achieve Goals

We have a multi-tiered approach to making the ranch profitable.

• Correct size of our cows to match our environment
• Mature cows weigh on average 1,050 to 1,300 pounds
• Most efficient size of cows on our ranch

We tell folks that we’re not really in the cow business but in the solar energy business. The mother cows teach the calves what plants to eat, where the water holes are, and where to hide out during a snowstorm.

Social aspect

• No sickness
• Calve from June 10 through July 25
• Most efficient size of cows on our ranch
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Ecological aspects

• Increase turnover
• Regenerate soil health

Rangeland Monitoring

Our monitoring is showing trends that we are concerned about compared to our Western Ranches:

• Bare ground remains too high
• Litter cover has not increased
• Species diversity is unchanged
• Vegetation basal density has increased—positively

We have adjusted to the things we can control. But we believe drought since 1999 into the story.

Brush Management

We have started removing encroaching stands of pinyon and one-seed junipers. The goals are:

• Increase herbaceous plant diversity
• Regenerate soil health
• Add to forage production
• Improve wildlife habitat

Drought Management Plan

We have been dealing with drought conditions on the ranch since the turn of the millennium. Below average precipitation has become the new norm for us. We stocked heavily in the early 2000s and continue to run with reduced numbers of livestock. Ranching with such wide fluctuations in growing season precipitation presents us with more of a challenge than does the fact that our environment is semi-arid with an average annual precipitation of 16 inches. We take drought planning very seriously as part of our holistic grazing strategy.

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