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Grazing Conference Ruminations

Our friends in Nebraska offered another outstanding lineup of topics and presenters at the 23rd annual Nebraska Grazing Conference in Kearney. Driving across the corn/soybean monoculture desert of south central/south east Nebraska gives a person time to process presentations shared, ruminating on them if you will. Much like last year, my plan is to summarize some of the information learned, in an attempt to pass on what was shared. Today will be a quick overview of the full conference topics and discussion.

Tuesday's events began with a stress-free livestock handling field tour with Dr. Ruth Woiwode and Curt Pate. Curt was also the evening keynote speaker, focusing on stockmanship and working with the land and livestock. Gathering seventy plus bred replacement heifers into a new portable catch pen facility, with a line of cars/spectators behind, drone flying overhead and a new cow boss, with different herding techniques, proved to be a teachable moment!

However, Mr. Pate's patience, instruction and perseverance got the group gathered, moved and held (without gates closed I might add!) in front of a multitude of distractions. Main points were approaches to "pushing versus pulling" livestock, managing the "thinking versus reacting" sides of the cow brain and the pros/cons of working from horseback, ATV and on foot. If you've never listened to Curt Pate, his insight and perspective alone made the conference a success and his information is worth studying and consideration.

A producer panel of Leopold Conservation award winners from ranches across Nebraska, provided insight into operational success and challenges for the future. Key points noted were: Well-run ranches require intensive management and are typically covered with polywire, where grazing management is a priority. The greatest tool for success on operations has been water development/distribution, in conjunction with cross fencing. One key to profitability has been the removal of as much fossil fuel powered equipment as possible, between the forage and the cow's mouth. Cover crops and crop residues have been integral to year-round grazing, which leads to more operational profitability potential. Labor, operational transfer, loss of grassland acres to crops, trees, recreation and absentee ownership were noted as challenges for the future of working ranches.

The Emerging Issues in Grazing Lands Management session offered some really good rapid-fire topics from private and public entities alike. Everyone acknowledged challenges and opportunities that permeate the grass-based operations and the rural communities whose vitality often goes hand in hand with these operations. Federal and private resources are being directed to preservation of grasslands through Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Inflation Reduction Act and Great Plains Grassland Initiative projects, to name a few.

Precision Livestock Management was the focus of Wednesday's program. Precision grazing management tools ranging from 3D cameras to capture weight gain/loss on pasture, to satellite imagery programs monitoring forage - like Rangeland Analysis Platform, to virtual fencing options were discussed. All parts of our world are advancing in technology, why would we think livestock production would be any different? One key statement was "Early adopters often reap the benefits, but sometimes being the earliest adopter isn't necessarily beneficial to an operation." There are lots of emerging technologies on the horizon, keep yourself informed.

There you have it, a quick, somewhat editorialized summary of another Nebraska Grazing Conference. Next week I'd like to pick up discussion on some of the stockmanship principles shared and demonstrated.