PROFILES IN LAND AND MANAGEMENT:
Benefits of Regenerative Ranching

Flying Diamond Ranch

Adaptive planned grazing to increase cattle stocking rates, reduce supplemental feed costs and animal mortality, and increase profits.

"We don't have any oil production here. The land has to make this work."

—SCOTT JOHNSON

Since 1907, the Johnson family has stewarded the Flying Diamond Ranch in Kit Carson, Colorado. Their success over the past 100 years has grown out of a tradition of holistically caring for the productivity and resilience of their family, animals, and land. In the early 1990's Scott and Jean Johnson began practicing adaptive planned cattle grazing on the ranch and have since expanded their business, improved the health of their land, grown the size of their herd, and created rewarding opportunities for their children to join, and take ownership of, the business.

THE RANCH

The Johnson Family began practicing adaptive planned grazing on their ranch after attending a Holistic Resource Management workshop with Allan Savory in the late 1980s. Their goal was to improve the health of their ranch and animals and lower what they were spending on inputs by mimicking the grazing behavior of native migratory herds of buffalo, antelope, and deer.

REGENERATIVE PRACTICES

The biggest changes have come from increasing their herd density and adjusting their grazing to increase the time the fields have to recover. Portable electric fencing and a distributed water system (funded in part through a grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)) have helped the Johnsons shrink the average paddock on their ranch from 1,500 acres to 300 acres. Each paddock is now grazed no more than 7 days (the regional average is about 180 days) and allowed almost a full year to recover and grow.

SEEING THE BENEFITS

These changes have led to significant benefits for the ranch, its animals, and the business including a dramatic reduction in bare ground, increased forage production and vegetation diversity, reduced runoff, improved groundwater recharge, and more wildlife. Further, increased forage productivity and improved utilization have increased the stocking capacity of the ranch by ~25%.

Working closely with nature and carefully monitoring livestock performance, operational costs, and ecological function has revealed other opportunities as well. While most producers in their area calve in the late winter to maximize the time calves can grow before going to auction, this strategy comes with costs that the Johnsons are now eager to avoid.

Late winter calving requires ranchers to supplement feed so nursing mother cows can meet the needs of their calves when forage is typically low in nutritional value. Seeing this, the Johnsons began calving in the spring. The change synchronized the nutritional demands of the mother cows with a plentiful forage season, mild weather, and an abundance of wild prey to reduce calf mortality.

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HIGHLIGHTS

30
ACRES PER ANIMAL UNIT

30 acres per animal unit is the stocking rate the Johnson's have achieved with high density/ long recovery grazing and better forage utilization. Before practicing adaptive planned grazing they required 40 acres per animal unit.

~0
CALF LOSS

~0 calves are expected to be lost each year to predation and inclement weather since switching their calving season to the spring. Surprise late-season storms may still cause some mortality, but calf loss from predation or weather is almost nonexistent on the ranch and the Johnsons no longer allow coyotes to be shot on their land.

1,200
COW/CALF PAIRS

1,200 cow/calf pairs and 800 yearlings now make up the Johnson's herd. They have grown their business nearly 50% each year for the past 3 years.

$25/hour
MINIMUM PAY RATE

$25/hour is the minimum rate the cattle business pays to the members of the family that own/operate it. This rate can go as high as $100/hour during particularly successful years and usually averages around $50/hour.

"We are getting more pounds off the acres... we're getting economic benefit by doing ecological things that improve the rangeland."

—WILL JOHNSON

Though this change reduced the size of calves at the auction, the family saw only a small loss in revenue (approximately $20/calf), and the loss was ultimately dwarfed by the combination of feed savings and increased profit from having more live calves to sell.

The Johnson family has done a lot to make sure that the people on their ranch are thriving too. Though intergenerational transfer is a huge challenge for many agricultural operations, the Johnsons approached this issue with the same practicality and innovative spirit they apply to land and livestock management. They have been eager to grow in new ways in order to provide opportunities for their children and their spouses to find meaningful and rewarding careers on the ranch.

As the 6th generation of Johnsons is born, the ranch business is growing by leaps and bounds—expanding beyond the original 25,000 acres of Flying Diamond Ranch to an additional 25,000 leased acres in Colorado Springs and Castle Rock, Colorado. ■

TOMKAT RANCH

The Profiles in Land and Management Series features the work of innovative ranchers and land managers who are achieving economic and ecological benefits on working lands.

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