

2011 Leopold Conservation Award

Fieldgroves base viable operation on conservation strategies

Buffalo – Of receiving the 2011 Leopold Conservation Award, Ryan Fieldgrove, who ranches in northeast Johnson County, says it's a humbling and rewarding experience.

Sand County Foundation, the Wyoming Stock Growers Association and EnCana Oil & Gas (USA) Inc. present the state award each year. A selection committee composed of seven representatives from within Wyoming conservation and agricultural chooses the winner.

"It is humbling to know that I am grouped in the same category as the past award winners and in association with this year's finalists. I am honored to receive this award, as my goal and business focus has always been to operate a financially viable operation with conservation as a basis," says Fieldgrove.

While Fieldgrove and his wife enjoy ranching as a way of life in which to raise their three children, their primary goal is to sustain and protect the asset passed on to them by Fieldgrove's parents. That's not an easy goal, considering Fieldgrove has worked full-time as an ag lending officer for First National Bank in Buffalo for the past 13 years.

"We feel like we have implemented conservation practices that fit not only our area but also our management style. Everything we do must either save us time and labor or save us money. I can pinpoint one or the other in all the practices on this ranch in the last 10 years," he notes.

"When my parents retired just over 10 years ago we were given the opportunity to take over a portion of our family ranch. The catch was that we also got the debt. We figured out a way to make it happen, even though we knew it wouldn't be easy," says Fieldgrove. "I knew a good conservation plan would be a part of our attempt to take over the ranch."

He says his first idea of conservation came when he realized that the most successful ranches seemed to be those with grass left over each year.

"Their cattle were in better shape, and their calves were heavier. I also saw that growing up on this ranch – it seemed like when we had a good grass year, everything did better. If that is the case, then grass is something that must be managed," he explains. "I started paying attention to stocking rates and pasture utilization at that point."

In 1999 the Fieldgroves' mission to control the noxious weed leafy spurge began, in effort to better manage their grass resource.

"The weed had been a problem all of my life, and it didn't seem like we were making any headway. We had always sprayed and did the traditional chemical applications to reduce or eradicate it, but it never worked. We'd gain one year, then shortly thereafter it would be back," he says.

Fieldgrove says he'd heard of using goats or sheep to control weeds, and he decided to give them a try.

"The first year we went to Texas and purchased some crossbred Boer goats, and we built a test plot of about five acres in heavily infested leafy spurge. We

thought it would take a couple months for the goats to do their work on the weeds, but it only took 10 days. They stripped every bit of plant matter and didn't touch any grass. It was apparent that goats control weeds," he comments. "It definitely did damage the spurge, and almost controlled it."

The following year the Fieldgroves developed a project that included their ranch, neighboring ranches and 500 goats for the summer. Test plots were again set up, and again the results were positive.

Through the next five years the Johnson County Weed and Pest helped offset the cost of test plot fencing and a herder to look after the goats. Aerial spraying and biological control using flea beetles were also used in some areas.

"A drastic reduction in leafy spurge occurred, and native forages began to come back," says Fieldgrove. "We consider the goats a constant and successful tool in controlling the weed and rejuvenating native grass species."

Although the control of weeds has been a success, the goats haven't been without their challenges for the Fieldgroves.

"Ten goats seem manageable, but 500 goats is a different story. The first year we thought we would kid 500 goats in January so they'd be old enough to turn out on the weeds in May. Someone forgot to tell me that goats kid like antelope. One day you don't have any, and the next day they're all done," says Fieldgrove.

"That first year I tortured my family and friends, trying to figure out what to do with 500 goats that kidded in 10 days – with mainly triplets – when we only had jug space for 50. While this may have been entertaining, it was a fiasco that wouldn't be repeated," he states. "The next year we tried kidding in June in the hills and on the weeds. That year it was very hot and dry and the nannies ended up abandoning many kids due to drought, or they couldn't remember which sagebrush they were hidden beneath."

Fieldgrove says that year the fattest eagles in Wyoming were seen on their ranch.

"We finally decided raising that many goats wasn't within our management ability, so we resorted to buying feeder and replacement goats, which we resell each fall, and that finally worked," he says.

By the seventh year the Fieldgroves decided to see if fewer goats would work without a herder and that is where the ranch sits this year, its tenth year, with a herd of 100 free-range goats equipped with GPS collars to monitor their location and browsing habits.

"It's been fun to see the success, because it's a lot of work. It was very expensive, and a lot of trial and error with different types of goats, and we finally found something that we think is manageable for a labor standpoint, and they truly do manage the spurge," he adds.

Throughout those years a priority area was created and an EQIP contract established through the Lake DeSmet Conservation District and the NRCS, which paid for the majority of a major cross fence and an incentive payment for rotational grazing for three years.

"The incentive payment helped us afford the improvements to our ranch headquarters, and we were also able to make some improvements to our existing stock watering system," says Fieldgrove.

Following that, the conservation district asked the Fieldgroves to participate in a Sage Grouse Habitat Improvement Program.

“We decided to participate through additional cross fencing to balance the grazing rotation around leks and brood rearing areas. In addition, we did some rangeland recovery through pasture aeration, a grazing plan was created and we now manage grass and pasture rotation with the idea of improving sage grouse habitat and staying out of their way during crucial times of the year,” he explains, noting that they also added escape ramps to their water tanks.

“Participation in this program has actually allowed us to increase the stocking rate of the ranch, as our pastures are now more efficiently utilized,” he says of the benefits. “This also saves us time and labor, as the cattle are concentrated now and we can better manage bulls and overall herd health.”

However he says a grazing plan is only as good as its variables.

“We knew the plan had to be flexible, but the first year with our cross fence we experienced the worst drought ever and had to sell 100 pairs in the spring. The remaining cattle simply overgrazed the draw bottoms and didn’t touch any of the hillsides, and that is where I learned about the balance of proper stocking rates and that less isn’t necessarily best.

“The next year was good, but the third year entailed the worst grasshopper infestation ever. Rotational grazing was pointless, as the grasshoppers didn’t abide by the plan.

“I quickly learned that rotational grazing works in theory, but the uncontrollable variables can make the worst of the best plan. Nonetheless, it is a mindset and a strategy that we will use as a tool for grazing management,” says Fieldgrove.

“The ranching way of life has provided my children with an education that can’t be replicated. It is my hope that they will understand that you can’t take everything without some form of repercussion. Sacrifice seems painful at the time, but it sure feels good when you finally reap the rewards, and most everything in life requires give and take until you find the right balance,” says Fieldgrove of raising kids on the ranch.

“Programs continue to develop for conservation practices as both agencies and the general public recognize the importance of sustaining natural resources,” says Fieldgrove. “I’m sure we will continue to participate if they make sense for the operation.”

Fieldgrove says he is grateful to receive the Leopold Conservation Award.

“It is my hope that all agriculturists are categorized as conservationists, and that the public looks favorably on our contributions to protect all our natural resources. I look forward to sharing my story further and hosting a ranch tour this coming summer. Until then, I have some fence to stretch, some cleaning up to do and some praying for a nice green backdrop when everyone gets here.”

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