



Walt Davis
Photo by Mary Logan Wolf; courtesy *Oklahoma Living*

Organic Before Organic Was Cool: *Oklahoma Rancher Raises Profits on Pasture*

—Wylie Harris

Some farmers convert to organic methods in search of higher profits. For Walt Davis, things worked out the other way around. “We didn’t set out to become organic,” says Davis, one of a handful of Oklahoma ranchers who raises certified organic beef. “We set out to save the ranch.”

It was 1974, and the cattle market had just collapsed, with prices falling by as much as seventy percent. Davis, a graduate of the animal husbandry program at Texas A&M, was following state-of-the-art management practices on his ranch in Bryan County, in southern Oklahoma east of Durant. His applications of synthetic nitrogen fertilizer and herbicides were boosting production, but the high price of those inputs left little in the way of profit.

“The first thing was to cut costs,” Davis says. “We dropped the nitrogen fertilizer, expecting production to collapse.” And while it did decline at first, Davis quickly found that forage legumes could make up the difference.

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Where soil conditions once deteriorated steadily under close-cropped bermudagrass swards, diverse stands of grasses and forbs now hold and build the soil. As a sign of improved soil health, Davis points to the earthworm castings

that have covered the ground in the wake of a two-day old rain.

Affordable nitrogen and erosion control aren’t the only benefits of forage legumes. As Davis learned, the legumes also lengthen the quality-grazing period. His heavily fertilized bermudagrass had a high but short-lived peak of forage quality. “The more species we introduced, the more we flattened that forage curve, and also began to lengthen it. It’s easy to increase the grazing period by sixty to ninety days just by adding species.”

The idea that diversity increases productivity is hotly debated among academic ecologists, but for Davis, it’s a workaday fact of life. His long list of forage legumes includes such mainstays as white clover, arrowleaf clover, alfalfa, vetch, singletary pea, button medic, and ball clover.

A network of electric fences and watering lines crisscrosses the ranch, allowing him to keep the cattle grazing wherever the mix of forage species is freshest. When one species is at its peak of production, another may just be germinating, and will offer continued grazing after the first has passed its prime.

The ranch started turning profits soon after the switch to lower inputs, but organic certification didn’t come until 1989, almost as an afterthought. “After years, we realized that for all practical purposes, we were organic,” says Davis. To certify, he had only to stop feeding protein cubes.

But he started receiving premium prices only in the past few years, when he arranged to sell to a meat company that retails organic, grass-finished beef. The main upturn in profitability came earlier, with the switch to lower inputs – and lower costs. That’s one of many important lessons that new

ranchers – or ranchers newly converting to pasture-based systems – can take from Davis' experience.

Davis has the same advice for new and old ranchers alike. “Learn to substitute management for money, and be very dubious of anybody that's trying to sell you anything. Agriculture is the most overcapitalized industry in the U.S. We have so much money at risk every year that the potential for loss has completely outrun the potential for profit. We have got to return agriculture to a biological foundation.”

Fertilizer costs are climbing sharply due to recent increases in the cost of the natural gas used in fertilizer production. Davis' “biological foundation” relies on nitrogen-fixing legumes to supply natural fertilizer for growing forages – paying less for a longer season of production. More months of forage production mean lower feed costs. The combination of greater forage diversity and intensive grazing management also diminishes weed problems, reducing – or in Davis' case, eliminating – the need for purchased herbicides.

Though this approach increases both economic and ecological viability, keeping cattle and forages synchronized in time and space isn't as simple as the

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conventional prescription of herbicides and fertilizer. Even after spending three decades working out the kinks, Davis has lost “nearly every legume on the place” to the past seven years' drought. To compensate, he's been reseeding 25

to 30 per cent of his land each year, instead of the usual 10 per cent.

“It's not going to be something that everyone can tap into,” says Davis. “If you're going to maintain high gains over a long period of time, you're going to have to put a lot of thought into it.”

Agronomist Wes Jackson has likened the management-intensive approach to increasing the ratio of “eyes to acres.” With lower entry costs and a higher requirement of human capital, it offers a natural way for more families to make a rewarding living in agriculture.

On those rewards, Davis is unequivocal: “There's no way I'd go back to conventional ranching, from the standpoint of profit or from the standpoint of quality of life.”

Wylie Harris is a fellow of the Food and Society Policy Program, a national program of professional fellowships funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Otto Bremer Foundation. To read more of his articles, go to http://www.foodandsocietyfellows.org/pages/individual_fellows/fellows-bio.cfm?people_id=47

RESOURCES

Walt Davis shares his insights into successful pasture-based ranching as a hired consultant on resource management. He can be reached at wwdranch@aol.com.

Davis reckons that anyone trying to make a living at ranching needs to read *Holistic Range Management*, by Allan Savory, and take a Holistic Management course. Books, journals and websites with information on pasture-based ranching include:

Holistic Range Management, Allan Savory. 1988. Washington, D.C.: Island Press. 558 pages.

Grass Productivity, Andre Voisin. 1993. Washington, D.C.: Island Press. 353 pages.

Pasture Profits with Stocker Cattle, Allan Nation. 1992. Jackson, Mississippi: Green Park Press. 192 pages.

Why Grassfed Is Best, Jo Robinson. 2000. Vashon, Washington: Vashon Island Press. 127 pages.

American Farmland Trust's site on grass-based farming systems: <http://grassfarmer.com/>

Eat Wild: The Clearinghouse for Information about Pasture-Based Farming: <http://eatwild.com/>

The Savory Center is an international not-for-profit organization established in 1984 to coordinate the development of Holistic Management worldwide <http://www.holisticmanagement.org/>

The Stockman Grass Farmer is a monthly publication for grassland farmers sharing the latest in intensive grazing technology and pasture management. Call them at 1-800-748-9808, or fill out a brief online form to receive a free sample issue. Books and audio tapes available through the web site: www.stockmangrassfarmer.com/sgf/