

# AG NEWS & VIEWS



## PASTURE & RANGE

# Top 10 Traits of a Successful Grazing Land Manager

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more than 1 acre of farmland is lost per

According to recent data, the number of people moving to Southern Great Plains states like Texas is more than 1,400 per day. Private lands in the U.S. are undergoing significant changes. For example,

## DID YOU KNOW?

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minute. Most of these lands are privately owned and play an unseen yet critical role in water and food sustainability, and both national and energy security. Recent data from Texas A&M University suggests that of the 26.9 million residents in Texas, less than 10 percent of those live in rural areas and less than 1 percent are private landowners.

That less than 1 percent of the Texas population encompasses the land stewards of today and tomorrow. Recent data from

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the National Agricultural Statistics Service also estimates the average age of today's agricultural producer is 58 years old. It's more important now than ever that we recognize and support successful land stewards providing the other 99 percent of the population ecological services such as clean water, clean air, sustainable livestock products and wildlife habitat across the Southern Great Plains.

A survey was recently conducted of 14 resource professionals who have spent their entire working careers assisting these land stewards through the good and tough times. These professionals are from respected institutions such as the Noble Foundation, Texas Christian University Ranch Management Program, the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management, Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension and several private consultants. Together, these professionals total more than 469 years of experience. Based on their responses, we organized the top 10 traits of successful grazing land managers below.

#### #10 CAUTIOUS RISK TAKER

A cautious risk taker is someone with an open mind and willing to consider more effective and efficient methods of doing things. They often carefully consider new technologies and might implement a test on a small portion of their operation. Many times, they are willing to try new ideas and concepts. They take risks based on knowledge, experience, and sometimes hunches, but on a limited basis. They rarely risk everything and always operate within a safety margin.

#### #9 WILLINGNESS TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE

George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples, then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas." Most producers who are successful often get great ideas from their peers. They talk and learn from each other, many times gaining more satisfaction from seeing others succeed than themselves.

#### #8 HAVE CLEAR, MEASURABLE AND ATTAINABLE OBJECTIVES

Successful outcomes are very often a result of carefully planned objectives. Clearly stated objectives keep sideboards on expectations. In order to achieve success, you must also know when you get there. It is often stated, "You can't manage what you don't measure." From available forage to production costs, it's hard to take advantage of an opportunity if you don't know you had an opportunity in the first place. Monitoring and keeping good records is a common practice among successful ranchers. A recent study conducted by Texas A&M indicated that less than 15 to 20 percent of producers monitored their forage, indicating 80 to 85 percent may not know how much forage they have or need. Most successful producers, at a minimum, consistently monitor rainfall, available forage, body condition score relative to class of livestock and reproductive stage, and market tendencies. Then, they act on monitoring triggers.



#### #7 HAVE A CONSERVATION ETHIC

In 1949, Aldo Leopold stated, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." Successful managers want to leave their properties for the next generation better than when they received it. This requires an inner conviction to be a responsible caretaker of the land and all its parts.

#### #6 BIG PICTURE THINKER

Big picture thinkers don't get caught up in the weeds. Meaning, they focus on big picture outcomes and don't get derailed by minor setbacks. Where others tend to find problems, they try to find opportunities and structure their business to decrease risk and be positioned to capitalize on opportunities inherent in turbulent conditions. They understand how all the pieces of their operation are inter-related and find leverage to change the system for the better of the entire operation.

#### #5 LIFELONG LEARNER

Successful managers often stay up-to-date of new techniques and technologies, and they are not afraid to cautiously try them. Often, they keep updated by staying active in professional development and associations. However, being involved is not enough. They have the ability to not just hear but listen. They understand that they can learn something from anyone, often learning the most valuable lessons from the most unlikely situations.

#### #4 HAVE AN INQUISITIVE AND PASSIONATE MIND

Inevitably, if you ranch long enough somebody's going to say, "You're doing it wrong." Inquisitive and passionate ranchers often are the innovators in the crowd, asking questions and continually evaluating everything. Most are quick to disregard practices that do not work and search for new solutions. This requires a creative and innovative mind that is always thinking. They often reject the "that won't work here" or "this is how we've always done it" paradigm. They are keen observers, and many come from a nonranch

tional ranch background.

#### #3 UNDERSTAND ECOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Most successful managers have the ability to observe climate, animal and plant interactions, and they make management decisions that capitalize on those conditions. They understand the real purpose of roots versus leaves and where the plant makes its food. They may not know the name of the plant, but they understand plant selectivity and production differences. Most certainly, they understand soils are the building blocks. They know that soils are teeming with life and that biology drives most systems such as nutrient cycles, water cycle, etc.

#### #2 MANAGE THE RANCH AS A BUSINESS

These are managers who make decisions based on the physiological needs of the vegetation, the nutritional and habitat requirements of the animals, and the financial realities of the ranching business enterprise. They scrutinize every dollar spent, limiting unnecessary and nonprofitable inputs. They completely understand that profitability will often come down to how he or she controls costs.

#### #1 FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTIVE

Most successful managers are continually updating plans based on new knowledge. Many times the reason for their success is they are not rigidly managing. Stocking rates are the most critical decision a producer has to make, and this decision should be flexible with weather and markets. Many of the biggest ranch failures, ecologically and economically, have come from having rigid stocking rates despite changing forage conditions. Successful grazing land managers understand there are no easy answers, no simple solutions, no cookbook recipes for success, no magic wonder grass, no magic breed, and no magic herbicide. They succeed because they are flexible and adapt.

Concentrating on developing any single trait on this list is a move in the right direction. However, the best grazing land managers will possess some aspect of all of these traits. 🐾