Beating drought takes planning

By ALAN NEWPORT

When it quit raining in western Kansas, Wade Berlier found that being an excellent grazing manager didn’t solve all his problems — but it made a huge difference.

For example, where some ranchers in his area lost large amounts of their better grass species, he lost grass only in some paddocks of his ranching operation west of Lakin.

“It’s in certain cells, so it has to be a management problem,” Berlier says. “But I keep a pretty decent set of records, and I haven’t been able to identify anything that’s different about my management on those cells.”

Also, prickly pear cactus was completely gone from the ranch before the drought years of 2000-04. It has showed its ugly carcass in a few spots, but it is thinning again now.

The sagebrush was thinning before the drought, and it didn’t seem to retrench during those dry years.

Before Berlier started planned rotational grazing in the mid-1980s, he was seeing areas of algal capping on the ranch soils. This is a classic symptom of desertification. Areas covered with algae caps do not grow grass again unless the soil is stirred by hooves or some other thing and the ground is given time to grow weeds and forages. Even during the drought, these algal caps did not return.

The best news of all

Moreover, Berlier has already been able to restock nearly to the level where he was before the drought hit, with no additional inputs such as hay or purchased feed. That may be the best news of all. Certainly that’s unusual in the annals of American ranching.

Before the desert came to dwell in western Kansas, Berlier had used carefully planned and executed cell grazing to increase his stocking rate by about 30% overall, from one cow per 35 acres to one cow per 25 acres. In the tighter soils along the river bottom, he had doubled the stocking rate.

Ultimately, he was running more cows with fewer head-aches and much lower overhead costs. He began the changes in 1986 after attending a holistic management school at the HM center in Albuquerque, N.M. The ranch got better and better; he added cattle and acreage. He built subdivision fencing and livestock water points. Throughout the 1990s, the yearly rainfall hardly topped the annual 17-inch average.

“We were putting more cattle on the ranch, and I didn’t know where the end was going to be,” Berlier says.

Learning from drought

Then in the year 2000, Mother Nature’s version of Y2K hit. Four years of drought tested everything Berlier had learned and taught him even more.

He enacted classic drought management for a holistically trained grazier, meaning he put all the herds together and slowed down the rotation. Then he used his records to create estimates for the grass remaining ahead of his cattle and how many days it would carry them. Further, he destocked early and often to stretch his forage supplies.

In 2002, 2003 and 2004, Berlier’s cattle grazed each of the nearly 100 paddocks on the ranch only one time.

Rainfall has become more plentiful again and new grass is replacing that which died. Weeds filled the gap, and Berlier says he has noticed the cattle will eat nearly everything on the sandy ranch at some time during the year.

“I’m not a born-again grazier,” Berlier says. “I never was one of those save-the-world people like some who get into holistic management. It just made sense to me. ’I wouldn’t go back to the old ways, but I don’t know that I’d encourage anyone to take the path I’ve taken. There’ve been a lot of mistakes and a huge learning curve.’

Despite the hardships of learning and the brutality of drought, Berlier has hope for the future and plans to essentially stay the course.

“I still feel like there’s upside potential on this ranch that could be harvested and that’s sustainable,” he says.

Newport writes from Carnegie, Okla.

At a glance

- In mid-’80s, Berlier began planned rotational grazing.
- Holistic management helped him manage four dry years.
- Cell rotation, grazing estimates helped rancher during drought.

THIS GRASS clump did not survive the drought, but because Wade Berlier’s management system includes a good intensive-grazing and recovery cycle, other species of plants are filling in around it.

THIS SANDY hillside on Wade Berlier’s ranch west of Lakin, Kan., is still in great shape after the drought. Not all the property fared so well, but Berlier says nearly the entire ranch looked this good when the drought started in 2000.

BERLIER BUILT an adequate water system after he started managed grazing in the 1980s. The system helps him daily since he has about 100 paddocks, and it made livestock watering a nonissue when drought hit the ranch.

THE KANSAS grazier uses more than 120 miles of internal electric fencing to control and manage grazing on his ranch in the sandy river country southwest of Lakin, Kan.

Raising the bar on grass

Most cell graziers want to raise the level of their forage toward taller grasses. On the Wade Berlier ranch, big bluestem and sand bluestem were making a comeback before the drought. Four dry years decimated the tallgrass populations. Berlier isn’t sure why; tall grasses usually have the deepest roots and the greatest drought tolerance.

His regional Natural Resources Conservation Service range scientist suggested the bluestem plants in those early stages of development may have had young root systems still unprepared to deal with the ravages of drought.