HALE COUNTY

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION

August 11, 2023 | ISSUE 11

THE GRAZE

A quarterly newsletter with livestock and agronomy updates.

IN THIS ISSUE:

The GRAZE

ALL THINGS LIVESTOCK AND RANCHING

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TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION

Virtual Fencing: A Climate Adaptation Strategy

BY USDA NORTHWEST CLIMATE HUB

WHAT IS VIRTUAL FENCING?

Virtual fencing, a relatively new technology, allows ranchers to control livestock distribution in rangeland landscapes without physical fences. Livestock wear collars that communicate with GPS and reception towers to form a virtual fence set by the rancher or land manager. When the livestock reach the limit of the virtual fence, auditory stimuli (a series of loud beeps) emit from the collar. If livestock continue their direction of travel beyond the boundaries of the virtual fence, they receive a benign shock. Cattle have demonstrated the ability and tendency to rapidly learn the virtual fencing cues, eventually responding to the audio cue alone. Several studies have documented success with sheep and goats as well.

ADAPTING TO A CHANGING CLIMATE

Because virtual fencing can help rangeland managers become more adaptive to variable conditions, it could help managers to adapt to the variable impacts of climate change. Virtual fencing can be used to contain animals within a desired area, exclude them from undesired areas, or move them across the landscape without the need for physical fences. For example, as wildfire frequency and size increase in the Great Basin due to climate change and the spread of invasive annual grasses, it is likely that more traditional fences will burn, or areas within traditional fencing units will burn. Virtual fencing could allow ranchers and rangeland managers to reestablish boundaries more quickly for livestock in post-fire environments, or to keep livestock away from recently burned areas.

Virtual fencing also has the potential to improve soil and water quality through making managed grazing more accessible as a practice. Managed grazing is careful management of livestock density and the timing and intensity of grazing. It can stimulate plant regrowth and add manure to the soil. While ranchers with traditional fences can also practice managed grazing, it requires much more planning and labor, and animal movements are limited to pastures defined by permanent fence boundaries. Virtual fencing allows managers to frequently and efficiently move livestock from one pasture to the next and to define new within-pasture boundaries.

The use of virtual fencing to contain cattle on sagebrush rangelands has the potential to create fuel breaks needed to help fight wildfires in that ecosystem, a recent Oregon State University and USDA-Agricultural Research Service study found. Credit: Oregon State University

Benefits:

- Allows ranchers to change the locations of livestock grazing, both between and within years
- Allows ranchers to move livestock with reduced labor inputs
- Can be used in areas that are difficult to fence
- Eliminates wildlife conflicts with traditional wire fencing
- Can exclude cattle from areas of management concern, including burned sagebrush steppe
- Can prevent overgrazing
- Can limit undesired effects of grazing in riparian areas

Challenges:

- Involves collar installation
- Relies on functional technology
- Has a high upfront cost of implementation

Virtual fencing has proven effective in excluding cattle from riparian areas, areas of management concern, recently burned areas, and areas with regenerating saplings. Virtual fencing has also been found effective in encouraging cattle to graze on undesired/invasive species. In Alaska, virtual fencing is being tested for increasing the efficacy of reindeer reintroduction on the Seward Peninsula. Additional research is needed to evaluate virtual fencing technology in larger rangeland settings, particularly to understand if ease of use changes with scale, since animals interact with larger perimeters less often.

For an example of this adaptation practice in action, view our **Adaptation in Action profile** of the work the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center completed on virtual fencing as an effective means of excluding cattle from burned areas in sagebrush steppe rangelands.

Funding Opportunities:

USDA Conservation Innovation Grants

USDA Conservation Reserve Program

Walking in another's rotational grazing pastures

Texas A&M AgriLife initiates peer group learning for regenerative ranch management

BY KAY LEDBETTER

When Joe VanZandt walks across his ranchland in Wheeler County, he observes the soil, the plant growth, water availability and the cattle. Like most ranch owners, he knows how each connects and contributes to a successful ranching operation.

Ranching is a family affair for the VanZandt's. The family's multigenerational ranch in Mobeetie is why he, his wife, Janie, and now his grandson, Josh Reid, have all taken the Grass Grazing and Animal Management School coordinated and taught by Tim Steffens, Ph.D., Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service range specialist and West Texas A&M University assistant professor in Canyon.

It's also why he and his family joined a peer advisory group formed for alumni of Steffen's school. This peer group was formed through a Southern Risk Management Education Center grant

Joe VanZandt, far right, discusses the grass growth on his property with a group of ranchers who were participating in a peer advisory group focused on regenerative ranch management. (Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Pancho Abello)

received by Pancho Abello, AgriLife Extension economist and assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics in the Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

VanZandt said they did not hesitate to join the peer advisory group when it began meeting across the Texas High Plains and neighboring counties in Oklahoma. They were eager to meet and learn from other ranchers about resource management, finances, profitability and succession planning.

“This peer group has been very beneficial,” VanZandt said. “I wasn’t sure if, as an older person, it would help me. However, we went to a different operation each month to see what they were trying to do and learned about their specific circumstances. We benefited from seeing how other people have adapted their operations to fit their situation, because no two operations are the same.”

Peer-to-peer education expands ranch management understanding

Steffens teaches “profitable, regenerative grazing management,” which he explains is not typically practiced by many ranchers.

VanZandt had heard about the rotational grazing method, often called holistic management, since it was first developed and promoted. But most ranchers didn’t understand how to incorporate it into their operations. They knew it involved smaller pastures and moving cattle around, but they didn’t pay close attention to what was happening to the land these cattle were grazing.

The peer advisory group gathered monthly on a different member’s ranch to discuss their successes and issues as they incorporate the regenerative ranch management practices. (Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Pancho Abello)

Experimenting and learning new management practices can lead to underperforming cattle at first, so some producers walk away from the new method before they get things right, he said. But over time, ranchers have refined the process. They’ve implemented more adaptive grazing management practices to evaluate both the cattle and the grass in the paddock, then move the cattle according to grass condition and not planned days.

Steffens agrees. The basics of the regenerative grazing ranching style is to manage when, where and how many animals are grazing a particular spot at a particular time, how long they stay and how often they come back. Sometimes, he said, adopters of the practice may feel they are alone or the only ones making mistakes.

Abello said he found a way to overcome that feeling of isolation when he was working on a 17,000-acre farm and ranch operation in Argentina. He participated in two peer advisory ranching groups for many years and wanted to bring that learning style to this AgriLife Extension program and this ranching group.

“I owe a lot of what I learned and how I grew professionally to being a part of those groups,” he said. “They were groups formed by ranchers and farmers who were willing to share their experiences and make the most of each individual’s skills to reach solutions to their problems and make decisions in their own businesses.”

Building the two-step learning process

Steffens and Abello said they believe this peer advisory group concept is perfect for ranchers who are willing to continuously improve their business, productivity and resources. Initially, the school provides 40 hours of in-depth training on profitable and productive livestock management to achieve lifestyle, livelihood and landscape goals. Then, to complement the programming within the school, the peer group serves as a reciprocal advisory board.

“Our whole concept behind establishing the peer group was to allow the ranchers to bounce ideas off one another,” Steffens said. “Although everyone has been through my school and they have a common paradigm, they all come with different viewpoints.”

Ranchers from across the Texas Panhandle and neighboring Oklahoma counties discuss the soil and grass properties on the peer advisory group ranches. (Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Pancho Abello)

Abello said this first peer group included young and older producers as well as a mix of men and women – a very diverse group in age and gender. Although the peer group was comprised of people from different walks of life, they came together and bonded because of their views on how to manage their grass and ranch.

“Like in every group, as time goes by, the group bonds and the participants start sharing more information. About halfway through the year, they started sharing everything,” he said. “We talk about every aspect of the business. We discuss all the issues an operation has, and the rancher host gets input from the others.”

Learning in school, learning in the pasture

VanZandt, a former AgriLife Extension county agent, and his family have attended the school multiple times. He said he learns a bit more each time and hears something different from the people involved.

Abello elaborated on the importance of ranchers continually expanding their ranching knowledge, even if they have been in operation for a long time.

“By adapting new grazing techniques, you may not only help profits, but you can help the sustainability of your business in the long term,” he said. “For example, the better I manage my soil and grass, the better I will be prepared for a drought. Also, the better the soil quality, the more productive the land will be for future generations. Of course, we want to be more profitable right now, but we also need to learn how to sustain that profitability into the future.”

Providing an example from his business, VanZandt said he had to sell cows and calves in the summer two years ago. He needed to reduce his cow herd to a more manageable stocking rate, so he could leave grass cover on the pastures and not graze it to the ground.

“We’ve learned in Dr. Steffen’s school to leave a good cover on the ground to serve as a food source for the soil microorganisms when they die off,” he said. “On our sandy loam soil, a lot of the acreage was broken out 100 years ago or more; the rolling country was stripped of its cover of grass, and the replenishing nutrients from the cover died off. The soil began to blow away.”

VanZandt said some of his ranch has been in his family since 1901, and it hasn’t been farmed, so it has good topsoil still in place. However, the neighboring farmland he purchased was severely eroded and washed away.

“My goal was to figure out how to make this ol’ wore-out land better by managing the grass and cattle,” he said.

In the peer advisory groups, one benefit of seeing other operations is learning how they adapted in similar situations and picking up some tricks of the trade from each other, VanZandt said. Not everything fits all operations.

Starting small to grow the community

Initially, Steffens created the school to help beef cattle producers find more profit and better steward the land, wildlife, cattle and other natural resources in the Panhandle.

But now, through the peer advisory groups, he and Abello know this AgriLife Extension-based educational process could lead to a much larger community of practice and understanding that invites participants to continue learning from one another long after the school is over.

Steffens said while the initial group consisted of 12 early adopters, the peer advisory group opportunity is open to all the alumni of his schools.

“I’m hoping we will get more groups going,” he said. “I’m doing another school right now. Once the word gets around about this peer advisory group and others see how they can learn from one another, I hope this first group will move to an advanced level, and another group will start again at the beginning.”

Rains both good and bad for Texas Panhandle

Texas Crop and Weather Report – June 13, 2023

BY ADAM RUSSELL

Agricultural operations in the Texas Panhandle are adjusting to above-average rainfall over the last month that improved soil moisture profiles but is delaying fieldwork, according to a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service expert.

Emerged cotton plants show stress from the continually wet conditions and cooler temperatures. (Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Jourdan Bell)

Recent rains in the Texas Panhandle have reversed much of the region's moisture deficit brought on by several years of drought. While beneficial to the long-term prospects for agriculture, heavy rains and soggy conditions are causing planting delays for some producers and destroying crops for others.

The inability to access fields is preventing producers from planting planned crops like cotton and corn. Producers are now assessing field conditions and evaluating their planting options, said Jourdan Bell, Ph.D., AgriLife Extension agronomist, Amarillo.

Rain challenges producers in Texas Panhandle

Many rainfall events around the Panhandle during May were slow, soil-soaking events that improved the soil moisture profile. Isolated heavy rainfall caused flooding, but the rainfall events that led to catastrophic flooding in towns like Hereford and Amarillo were not the norm for most of the region.

Precipitation has consistently fallen throughout the Panhandle since mid-May, so the region is saturated. Hereford received more than 20 inches of rainfall over one month, which is above its average annual precipitation of around 18 inches. The Hereford flooding was also caused by extreme amounts of rainfall in a short time – around 11 inches in two hours in some areas.

The Texas A&M AgriLife Research station at Bushland had received more than 10 inches over the last month, Bell said. Prior to last month, only 0.9 inch of rain was recorded at Bushland from Jan. 1-May 1.

Rainfall in June has continued that cycle. Precipitation amounts were also very sporadic, with some production areas receiving more or less than others nearby. Rain has replenished stock tanks, playa lakes and filled creeks and even lakes that Bell and others have never seen hold water.

Bell said there are still fields with standing water and crops that are likely drowned out. Other planted fields have issues with soil crusting that prevents good crop emergence. Another round of storms on June 11 and June 12 brought hail that impacted many more fields across the entire Panhandle. Cotton fields planted in early May are also developing very slowly because of cool conditions, provided they were not hailed out. Early planted corn looked good if not drowned or hailed out.

“Before the rain, many producers were reevaluating planting decisions because of the drought and declining groundwater, and now it’s been challenging to get in the field and get work done because of the rain,” she said. “And now we are seeing many fields that were not planted or, if planted before the rains, drowned or hailed out. It takes time for fields to dry enough to access, so the challenge for producers is to get their summer crop in before it’s too late.”

Rain impacts on wheat, warm-season crops

Most wheat acres failed earlier in the season due to drought, Bell said. Consistent rains throughout May likely benefitted remaining wheat fields and harvest potential, but grain yield potential was set prior to the recent rainfall.

Bell said a considerable amount of the region’s small grain crops are used for forage, and later-maturing small grain species used for forage, such as triticale, are likely to experience greater boosts in yields compared to earlier-maturing wheat varieties.

Bell said wheat is fortunately not at a stage where producers are concerned about sprouting heads, but there may be some grain test weight losses from widespread leaf diseases like rust. It is too late to spray for foliar diseases, but producers are hopeful the impact on grain weights will be minimal.

The rain’s impact on warm-season crops will be mostly good because fields needed the soil moisture as crops move into hotter summer periods, Bell said. But the consistent rainfall has also led to below-normal temperatures, and cooler conditions have impacted plant development progress because of low heat unit accumulation.

Some producers were able to get cotton planted before the rains began in May, Bell said. But the planting window is closed for Panhandle cotton if it is not in the ground at this point. The dates for crop insurance and late planting have passed, so producers with fields not planted or that need to be replanted will need to evaluate other options.

The soil moisture will be crucial for corn production, but corn can still be risky because of its high moisture requirement if producers have low well capacities, she said. Producers will need to consider earlier-maturing hybrids if planting corn and shift their period of peak water use later.

Sorghum provides flexibility for producers because it can be successfully planted into late June as long as they consider the appropriate maturity class, she said.

“Even though it’s been very wet, we know it can quickly turn very hot and dry,” she said. “The forecast is transitioning into an El Niño, but I do think it is important that producers still consider available moisture and irrigation well capacity when making the final decision.”

Other benefits from rainfall

The rains in May and June are likely to significantly improve forage production and rangeland grazing and browsing for both livestock and wildlife, as well as water availability, Bell said. Summer grasses will likely get a boost from the replenished soil moisture profile.

More than 50% of the acreage in the Panhandle is native rangeland, making those acres an essential resource for livestock, she said. Many of those areas have been locked in drought for multiple years, and the moisture will be very beneficial.

“We tend to focus on crops, but the benefits to rangeland and grasslands are incredibly important,” she said. “Ranchers are also dealing with fences and roads that washed out. Both crop and livestock producers faced damages and losses to the recent rains.”

AgriLife Extension district reporters compiled the following summaries:

CENTRAL

Rainfall was spotty over the past week, and temperatures have risen. Soil moisture levels were adequate to surplus. First cuttings of Bermuda grass were being cut and baled with good yields reported. Wheat and oat harvests were nearly complete. Wheat yields from fields with heavy Hessian fly pressure were one-third lower than fields with little to no insect pressure. Good yields were coming in at 50-70 bushels per acre. The corn crop was in good condition. Grain corn was mostly at the water ripe stage and beginning to color. Sorghum was rapidly reaching the heading stage. Some sesame was being planted following the wheat harvest. Pastures looked good but were covered in weeds. Erath County reported several calls related to hypoxylon canker in oak trees. Algal blooms in ponds increased along with weed pressure. Livestock were in excellent condition. Sheep and goat markets held steady. The cattle market took a slight upturn. Livestock fly numbers remained consistent. Rangeland and pasture conditions were good.

A map of the 12 Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service districts.

ROLLING PLAINS

Most areas reported sporadic rainfall throughout the week. Areas that remained dry proceeded with wheat harvest. Many counties reported better-than-expected wheat yields. Cotton planting proceeded in areas dry enough to enter as the planting deadline was set at the end of the month.

COASTAL BEND

Very hot, dry conditions were reported. Conditions were drying topsoil quickly. Corn was in the dent stage and starting to dry down. Corn looked very good, with significantly higher yield potential over last year. Corn harvest was underway in some areas. Sorghum crops also showed potential for above-average yields, but later planted fields will need more moisture to perform as well as earlier planted fields. Grain sorghum was turning red; harvest should begin in the next few weeks. Wheat fields were harvested, and yields were fair to good. Early planted soybeans were in good to excellent condition. Rice was doing well and starting panicle development, with some early rice starting to head. Cotton conditions were fair to good in most fields. Cotton responded extremely well to the moisture in late May and early June. A lot of the earlier planted cotton was starting to square and bloom. Extreme heat and dry conditions were starting to take a toll on pasture and rangeland conditions. Pastures were in fair to good condition but could use some rain. Weed and insect control continued to be a priority, but no major problems were reported. Hay harvest was in full swing, and yields varied from fair to good. Second cuttings of hay were coming to an end in some areas with wide-ranging yields and quality reported. Cattle on pasture were in good to excellent condition, and feeder cattle prices were at or near record levels. Calves gained well throughout the spring and looked good.

EAST

Subsoil and topsoil conditions were adequate. Hay production was in full swing across the district. Producers were spraying for weeds. Scattered rainfall was received in most counties. Pasture and rangeland conditions were good. Blackberry, blueberry and summer vegetable harvesting continued. Cattle markets were strong. Livestock were in fair to good condition. Horn flies remained a major problem. Wild pig damage was reported.

SOUTH PLAINS

Continuous rain events caused local flooding and prevented fieldwork, including cotton planting. Temperatures began to heat up towards the end of the week allowing access to fields in some areas to continue planting. Established crops were slowly developing due to cooler temperatures, but warmer temperatures and sunny skies in the forecast should help. A few fields of cotton were zeroed out due to hail damage. Some cotton fields sustained minor damage from thrips. Grain crops and pastures were thriving due to the moisture. A few irrigation systems were turned back on ahead of the dry, sunny forecast.

PANHANDLE

Wet conditions kept farmers out of their fields for most of the week. Most counties in the district reported adequate subsoil moisture, with some reporting surplus topsoil moisture. Crops were in fair to good condition. Planting resumed on corn and began on grain sorghum in some areas, and most fields needed weed control. Corn that was planted early in the season looked excellent. Wheat was still maturing, but some fields were beginning to turn color. Cotton conditions were questionable due to

extreme rainfall. Emerged cotton was growing slowly due to overcast, cool days and surplus topsoil moisture. Rangelands were green, growing and recovering well. Most pastures were not stocked to allow them time to recover. Rangeland and pasture conditions were mostly fair to good. Fly issues on cattle were a problem, and some pinkeye was showing up. Some foot rot problems were beginning to appear.

NORTH

Soil moisture levels were short to adequate. Some counties received scattered thunderstorms, while others reported sporadic rain. Hail damaged crops in some areas. Pasture and rangeland were in fair to good condition. Corn looked good and was tasselling in most fields. Soybeans and grain sorghum were doing well. Oats were being harvested, and peanut planting was underway. Livestock were in good condition. Spring-born calves were doing well. Nuisance flies were still very intense in most counties.

FAR WEST

Daytime temperatures were in the mid-80s to low-90s and in the 70s overnight. Soil moisture levels continued to improve. Spotty showers delivered trace amounts to 2.25 inches of rain. Storms brought damaging hail as well. Cotton planting was complete, but fields were growing slowly due to cool night-time temperatures. Cotton around the El Paso area was being irrigated. Corn and sorghum were doing well in the weather, but melons were behind schedule. Conditions were favorable for cotton planting if producers were able to access fields. Pecan orchards looked good, but producers were noticing potential leaf spot damage. Rangeland conditions were improving, and pastures were greening up nicely. Most ranching operations were wrapping up a first hay cutting, and rangelands were expected to recover exceptionally following the rainfall. Alfalfa fields looked good, and some fields were cut despite the rain. Livestock were in fair condition and improving, and producers finished working of lambs and kid goats.

WEST CENTRAL

Scattered rains delivered trace amounts up to 1.3 inches, with some hail damage reported. Temperatures were rising, and humidity levels were above normal. One county reported temperatures above 100 degrees. More rain was needed to fill stock tanks and lakes. High temperatures were stressing plants. Cotton planting was delayed by wet conditions, and several fields held standing water. Pecan orchards had promising crops, but pecan nut casebearers caused some early damage.

Producers were harvesting wheat, preparing fields and shredding pastures where they could. Some producers cut and baled Bermuda grass and hay grazer. Pastures and rangelands looked good and were improving, but weed pressure was high. Rangeland and pastures that were overgrazed were slower to recover. Livestock looked excellent, with good grazing availability. Cattle prices were up. Stocker steers sold $15-$25 higher per hundredweight, and stocker heifers sold $8-$10 higher per hundredweight. Feeder steers were $10-$15 dollars higher, while feeder heifers were $12-$14 higher per hundredweight.

SOUTHEAST

Multiple rains saturated the ground, but some areas received sporadic rainfall. Some heavy storms caused power outages. Very high temperatures were in the forecast. Ponds were full and livestock were in good condition. Agricultural operations were more optimistic about production through summer

following recent rainfall. Fieldwork occurred where drier conditions allowed. Rice fields looked fair, but early planted fields looked excellent. Cotton was planted, and planted fields progressed, but cooler, cloudy conditions slowed crop development. Irrigated and dryland corn was doing well. Hay and haylage harvest continued where the weather allowed. Forage production fields were being fertilized following recent cuttings. Grazing and forage production conditions were excellent. Cool-season forages were still present but declined, and weed control ramped up. Fly and mosquito populations were booming.

SOUTHWEST

Some areas remained dry, while others received trace amounts of up to almost 1 inch of rainfall. Temperatures were rising, and moisture levels declined. Wheat and oats were harvested. All irrigated crops looked good. The corn and sorghum fields looked excellent. Hay harvest was in full swing, and pastures responded well to recent rainfall. Gardeners were busy harvesting. Crop pest numbers were low. Cattle prices were excellent, and livestock were beginning to concentrate around water or in the shade to cool off. Livestock and wildlife were in good condition, but producers were warned that conditions were favorable for anthrax outbreaks.

SOUTH

Grain sorghum started to turn color, and corn was beginning to dry down. Some producers were applying harvest aids on grain sorghum. Midge, head worms, rice stinkbugs and sugarcane aphids were reported in grain sorghum. Sesame was in the early vegetative and flowering stages. A few garden webworms were reported in sesame, but the crops looked clean. Potato and sweet corn harvests continued. Later-planted corn fields were in the dough stage. Peanut planting was in full swing and should be completed soon. Cotton fields emerged and looked good. Irrigated fields were beginning to square, and some were setting bolls. Flea hoppers, tarnish bugs and whiteflies were reported in cotton fields. Bermuda grass fields were being cut and baled. Livestock and wildlife were looking for cool shaded areas or ponds or creeks to stay cool. Cattle prices were still very strong. Watermelons and cantaloupe harvests continued. Row crops were progressing rather well, with most farmers focusing on insect and weed control. Beef cattle conditions improved as grazing availability increased. Local markets continued to report below-average sale volumes with steady to strong prices for all classes. Ranchers and deer producers continued to supplement their livestock and wildlife. Quail were still in mating season.

Reid's Ram-blings: July 2023

BY July 10, 2023 by reid.redden

Are Small Farms the Future of Ag?

You would have to be living under a rock to not be aware that land fragmentation has and continues to occur in rural America. Many of us want to lament about the good ole days, when farms and ranches were large, families were fully supported by livestock operations, and close neighbors were rare. To be honest, I do too. But we must face reality and learn to adapt to a new environment.

If you are a long time reader, you'll know that I tend to look at things "half glass full," so lets look at the potential positive attributes of this trend. Land fragmentation typically will result in more people involved in agriculture. Naturally, small ruminants tend to fit well into these small scale farms and ranches. The recent USDA census indicates that there are more people raising sheep today than there were in the 1950s, when sheep numbers were at their highest. Strength comes in numbers, so this can definitely be a good thing, if we work together.

Before we get too much further in this article, I want to be clear that land fragmentation comes in many shapes and sizes. We can't really say that small scale farms are less than a set number of acres. In Far West Texas, 1,000 acres may be a small ranch; whereas, East Texas that might be 10 acres. But if I had to put a box on this; I'd say that small scale operations are those that can't run enough animals to justify the labor involved in management.

I don't know land fragmentation is necessarily a problem or in some ways a good thing. Sometimes we bemoan about how more no agriculturalists should better understand ranching and livestock production and what it takes to put food on the table. While I love the tradition of big ranches and having livestock at scale, I also worry that trying really hard to preserve that actually makes more people feel excluded from the agricultural way of life.

Funny how times change but many of the issues that we face are not too different from our grandparents and great grandparents. An issue that is likely new for American animal agriculture is how do we feed so many people with smaller farms that aren't highly efficient due to scale? Will we continue to see a trend towards chicken and pork, as these confinement operations can affordably buy feed and scale to meet the demand? And will we continue to rely on imported products to meet domestic demand? Or can we educate small scale sheep and goat operations to become more efficient and make up the difference in production from downsized large scale operations of the past?

Personally, I would like to see the latter of the three questions above. But that would go against historical trends. If one takes a look at the beef industry, it might suggest that it's pragmatic. Nearly 80% of beef in the US comes from operations with less than 50 head of cattle. Obviously, Americans eat a lot more beef than lamb or goat meat.

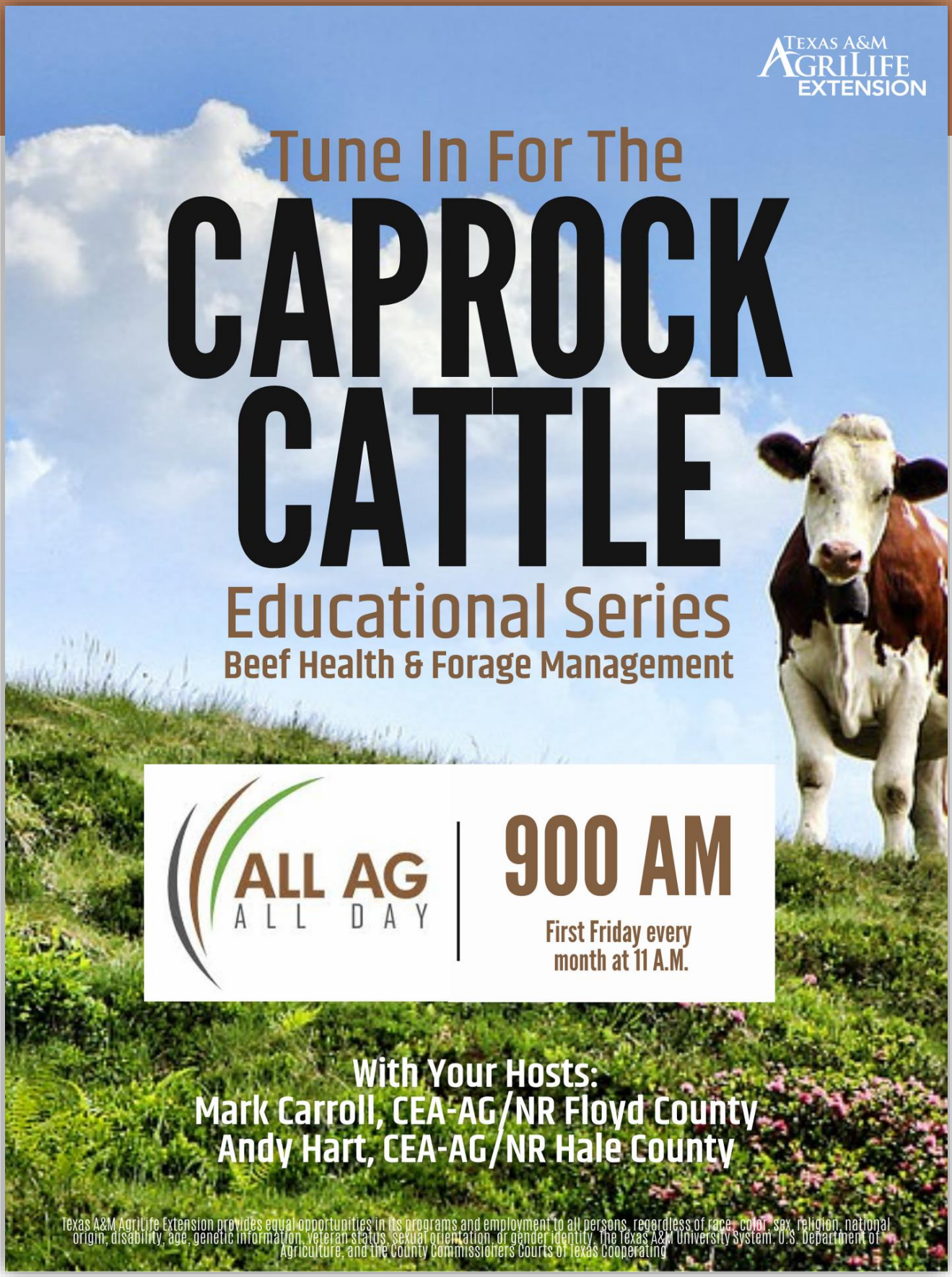
So why can the beef industry do this and the sheep and goat industry hasn't? Cattle are a first choice for many people who have a ranch. It is almost an American tradition to raise cattle if you have land. Second, cattle tend to be less labor intensive to manage. They stay behind fences easier, predation isn't a major concern, and they don't succumb to parasites in higher rainfall areas. The reality is, sheep and goats take often take more management than cows, and naturally if that management and labor is spread across a larger flock it is easier to pencil out. But I think as an industry we really need to lean into the idea that many of the new producers are not raising small ruminants to make a full living or if they are, it is in an out of the box concept. I am continually excited about the way that grazing sheep and goats for wildfire abatement or weed control has become a booming business. Grazing under solar panels is also a really big opportunity for sheep and goats. Operations that are direct marketing lamb meat and high quality wool

are experiencing success. In all honesty, everywhere I look I see sheep and goat folks redefining what it means to be a “traditional” rancher.

In extension, we are going to continue to help support the needs and problems faced by traditional and nontraditional small ruminant production. Sure, predation, parasites, range management are all major issues for large ranches and will continue to be for the newer, smaller operations, but through different educational approaches and research concepts, I am hopeful we can continue to improve in these areas.

I tend to believe that most of our problems are actually either self-induced or have been an issue for much longer than our lifetime. Creating solutions will take forward thinking individuals, whom have a good understanding of history, and work as a community of animal agriculturalists. I also believe that for some time the sheep industry has tried to make changes to revert back to “how things used to be”. That isn’t a sustainable concept for any industry. Land fragmentation is something that is a reality of modern times and we should all be looking ahead as to how to best include and support large and small scale sheep and goat producers.

To provide feedback on this article or request topics for future articles, contact me at reid.redden@ag.tamu.edu or 325-657-7324. For general questions about sheep and goats, contact your local Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service county office. If they can’t answer your question, they have access to someone who can.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