



CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Hefners Find Success in Rotational Grazing

Dan and Deb Hefner have been committed to conservation on their ranch near Whitewood, SD, for the past two decades. Dan tells that when he took over the ranch in the early 1980s, there were areas that were mostly weeds and brome grass.

The 2,300 acre ranch is divided by a gravel road and an active creek. Topography is one of the biggest livestock distribution challenges on the ranch. The diverse, rough terrain has vast differences in ecological sites in a relatively small land area. Elevation differences of up to 400 feet occur in some pastures.

Recognizing the diminishing productivity of their land, the Hefners teamed up with their local NRCS office (SCS at the time). District Conservationist Darrell Vig (now retired) worked closely with the Hefners in 1987 to set up their first rotational grazing system to fit their operation and meet their goals and objectives. Vig also helped them participate in the Great Plains Conservation Program.



Mr. and Mrs. Hefner were honored as recipients of an Excellence in Range Management Award given by the Society for Range Management South Dakota Section.

In the 20 years since, they have continued to work with NRCS and their local Elk Creek Conservation District to do extensive cross fencing to create about 24 grazing pastures and rotate through 8-12 of them with each cattle herd. Although there were several existing dams on the property, water lines were installed serving 18 water tanks, and numerous trees have been planted in shelterbelts.

Mr. and Mrs. Hefner were recently honored with a 2008 Excellence in Range Management Award given by the Society for Range Management, South

Dakota Section.

Today, the Hefners run two herds of cattle of about 85 head each. One herd runs in the northern "cell" of about eight pastures. The other herd runs in the southern cell, also with about eight pastures. Additional pastures are stockpiled for winter grazing. Hefner also rents additional summer pasture to run the remainder of his cattle.

The Hefners are able to graze for about seven months out of the year, beginning in early May. Cattle are moved to new pastures every three to five days. Ultimately with this rotational system, they

are able to get through the pastures about three times during the grazing season. When the winter snow gets too deep, some hay is fed. Pastures stockpiled with winter forage are also used.

Overall, the Hefners are pleased with the improvements they've seen through the implementation of their grazing system.

Among other financial resources, the Belle Fourche River Watershed Partnership provided cost-share for a deep well that Hefners installed to provide water to those pastures.

Dan credits the additional water distribution through tanks and pipelines with boosting his grazing use in pastures by 25 percent. Additionally, he is seeing some species like western wheatgrass return to his land. Twenty years ago, there was virtually no western wheatgrass. "Now in some pastures, it may make up 50 percent of the vegetation," he says. "It's been a big change," he concludes.

The Hefners intend to keep tweaking their grazing system to try and promote the return of even more native grass species. They recognize that when it comes to land stewardship, there is always more to learn.



Nestled in the Spring Creek valley of the northern Black Hills, the Hefners work closely with resource specialists on management plans with their goal of healthier natural resources.



From the Hefner's land, Bear Butte State Park poses as a beautiful landmark in the distance. Dan and Deb care immensely about the historic and cultural values of their ranch and the ranching industry as a whole. Dan is concerned with the health of the resources and has experimented with different management techniques to encourage new woody growth in the riparian areas of Spring Creek as it flows through the ranch. His grazing system includes flash grazing techniques in the riparian pastures as a management tool to lower the grass canopy enough so he can identify and treat weed patches.