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Recognizing Grasslands

Having spent the earlier part of this week at the Nebraska Grazing Conference in Kearney, I thought it would be fitting to try and condense one or several of the common themes from the talks and discussions down for my segment today. With topics ranging from pollinator habitat to carbon credit markets, grazing management to haying wet meadows, I figured this may be a rather daunting task. However, after a bit of reflection I think most of the discussion can boil down to one common theme: Truly recognizing from ourselves and others, what our grazing land provides. Let me explain.

Much of the production discussion from the conference focused on how we can utilize the grazing land we have to its fullest potential. At one point during a conversation about the invasion of cool season grasses like brome and Kentucky bluegrass into native warm season dominated pasture, the question was raised, “At what point do we consider these species naturalized and start using them instead of fighting them?”

Taking stock of the resources our operation holds and seeing how they fit with our long term goals is a good practice we don’t do nearly often enough. In this case, if a rancher’s goal is to provide grazing for their animals, figuring out how to use species that have some benefits like brome and bluegrass instead of fighting them in search of a more “natural” pasture is an option worth considering. In many places, these species are so endemic, that the likelihood of actually eradicating them from a pasture is slim to none.

Now if the goal is to have native dominated pastures, then efforts focused on control or at least suppression may be justified, but in this producer’s case, using these species as a resource instead of a roadblock made sense. If we don’t take the time to really look at what our grazing land provides and how it may fit into our larger goals, these shifts in perspective are hard to realize.

Going beyond ourselves, we also need to help others recognize the benefits that grasslands provide. In a panel discussion on carbon credits, the consensus was that it’s still the wild west when it comes to carbon markets and trading. Even with high amounts of uncertainty though, the carbon capture potential for grasslands is seen to be lower than forest or even crop ground. While we can have a whole other discussion about whether or not this is the case, this means that the return for grazers in carbon markets might initially be minimal. However, if these markets take off, one could envision a situation where grass pasture is converted to crop ground or planted to trees to improve the ground’s carbon capture potential.

But grasslands provide so much more than just a sink for carbon. They help control other greenhouse gasses like nitrous oxide, filter and slow water as it enters rivers and streams, provide an entirely unique ecosystem for thousands of wildlife species. Some of these species include insects like our native pollinators, need these refuge habitats to maintain healthy populations critical to the success of hundreds of species we plant for food and landscape. One of the greatest services our Nebraska grasslands provide is acting like a giant sponge across the sandhills, soaking up rainwater and recharging the Ogallala Aquifer. Research shows that forested ground in comparison absorbs about 70% less precipitation.

All of these benefits are above and beyond providing food for our livestock from ground that would otherwise be worthless. While we may recognize these benefits and often take them for granted, many others don't have a clue. Sharing this story and these ecosystem services with others, especially those with political appointments is vital.

Right now, UNL is looking at how current farm programs such as EQUIP and future ones like carbon credits could be rolled into an all-encompassing holistic approach where current best practices and ecosystem services an operation provides are rewarded, even if you've been doing it for 20 years. While that may not be the reality yet, sharing the broader picture of what our grazing land does is part of the process to move ideas like this forward.

While they often appear simple, recognizing a grassland for what it's worth has a variety of benefits. From making sure that our operation is utilizing the resources available to their full potential, to shaping future policy by sharing the services that grazing lands provide, it's about time we recognize the potential and value of our grasslands.

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