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Diversity Is the Name Of The Game At Black Leg Ranch

by COLLEEN SCHREIBER | Sep 3, 2020

By Colleen Schreiber

MCKENZIE, N.D. – Back in the 1980s and 90s Jerry Doan chased things like weaning weights and EPDs in his commercial cattle herd.

He had a lot of equity built up in his Black Leg Ranch, but then interest rates “went nuts” and it got to the point where he was having trouble paying the loan on the operating debt.

“My thought was my God I’m going to be the generation that loses this thing,” says Doan, who is the fourth generation to own and operate the family ranch. “I had to rethink things.”

In 2001, he lost his dad and his hired man who had been with him 15 years, and his kids were off in school. At that point he was calving heifers in a barn in March and his cows “in slop” in April, so one of the first things he did was he moved calving to May and June.

“It was the number one best economic decision I made,” says Doan. “People still laugh at our little calves, but the way I see it is a little profitable calf compared to a big unprofitable calf makes a lot more sense.”

He also began bringing down the size of his cow herd. He much prefers an 1100-pound cow compared to the industry average which he says is trending closer and closer to 2000 pounds.

“We’re not yet perfect on our cow size, but we’re getting better.”

Traditionally operators in North Dakota feed hay six months out of the year. One of Doan’s goals is to never feed hay, which he admits is a challenge.

His cows have grazed through 100-inch snowfall years without additional supplementation, but in those years the snow didn’t come all at once. Two years ago, he had 75 inches in three weeks, which was followed by bitter cold. They fed the cows hay on a cover crop field.

Doan graduated from North Dakota State University with an animal science degree. He says what helped change his way of thinking and his management in general is that he’s been through the holistic resource management program twice. He has two primary goals, to be profitable and to improve quality of life.

“We try to rotate around that because if we can’t make any money why are we doing this? That’s part of our problem is that too many of us have accepted that we can’t be profitable.”

Doan’s great grandfather homesteaded in the Dakota Territory in 1882 living in a sod house, but Deacon John Doan was the first of the Doan family to come from England arriving in America in 1629. Family history has it that the subsequent first few generations of descendants were Revolutionary-era Robin Hoods, who covered vast areas from Baltimore to Easton and from Long Island to Lancaster, in their quest to lighten rich Whigs of their burden of wealth.

The Doan Outlaws, also known as the “Doan Boys” and “Plumstead Cowboys,” were most renowned for being British spies during the American Revolutionary War. Cousins, Levi and Abraham Doan, died the same day in 1788. Both their tombstones prominently read “Outlaw.” After 150 years of escapades, the Doan family fled to Canada.

It was Jewell Doan, Jerry’s grandfather, who took the reins of the ranch as a young man and began growing it into what it is today, purchasing much of it for a dollar an acre.

“Grandpa took the fence down on two quarters of land twice because he thought he was losing the ranch, and he didn’t want to lose the fence,” says Doan. “Somehow both times he found money to pay the tax to keep going.”

His grandfather also brought the first Angus cattle to southern North Dakota in 1930, at a time when Herefords were the predominant breed. The cattle were quite wild, Doan says, but his grandfather, whom he described as “quite the character,” loved them.

“I remember going to the sale barn with him, and those cows would get after somebody and they’d come flying through the ring and my grandpa would just sit and laugh,” Doan recalls.

It was his black cattle that inspired the naming of the Black Leg Ranch. Today, Doan runs 600-700 cows all progeny of those first Angus cattle, and he custom grazes a couple thousand pairs in the summer. He started an intensive rotational grazing system back in the 1980s. He only did the one cell system. Looking back, he says he’d not do it again and hasn’t done it again because there’s too much pressure on the middle where the water is located. Instead he simply cuts his pastures into smaller pieces using high tensile electric fence. Now most pastures are 80 to 160 acres and he moves the cattle ever one to seven days.

He has a typical mix of good native grasses for the prairie pothole region of the Northern Great Plains with western wheat, buffalo grass, needle and thread, green needle grass and little bluestem being some of the dominant grasses. He’s been pleased with how the pastures have responded with the grazing system, particularly given that big bluestem, which was all but grazed out, has come back strong. The part of the ranch that has a lot of sandhills and was once mostly blow sand is now covered over with a good native mix and big bluestem is climbing right up the slopes of the sandhills.

“I never knew that was possible,” says Doan.

Water is a challenge and no water system is perfect with any rotational grazing system, he insists. He’s got good water, about seven feet, but to keep the water from freezing the pipeline has to be buried at least a foot deep. He’s installed several miles of shallow pipeline and has plans for more to better distribute the water and the cattle for summer grazing.

Doan says for those considering implementing an intensive grazing system the best approach is to take baby steps.

“Split a pasture or two or three and see how it goes. Then maybe do some more.”

He’s learned more and more about how the cattle perform in his grazing system. With the use of Texas A&M’s NUTBAL, a decision support system which models crude protein and net energy status of cattle, sheep and goats, he’s found that when grazing heifers, performance is better with pasture rest of 60 to 70 days. He also tries not to use a pasture the same way every year.

He’s strategically placed hay yards around the property so that even in the bad winters he’s able to keep their cattle out on the land instead of feeding them in corrals. He contends it’s better for the animals and better for the environment, namely soil health.

Doan is actively involved in the Grazingland Coalition and this year serves as president of the North Dakota group. He’s particularly focused on regenerative agriculture. Doan says that over the last 200 years, North Dakota has lost 75 percent of its native rangeland. Furthermore, he contends that a lot of it should have never been put into crops.

“Maybe we should pay attention to the last 25 percent if we care about wildlife, or carbon sequestration.”

He also contends that while producing a good product is important, what consumers care most about is the story.

“It’s the story that sells.”

He also insists that story is integrally related to soil health.

“Soil health equates to good forage health, ultimately rumen health and then the final dot in that is human health,” says Doan. “We are connecting those dots slowly. Once the consumer figures this out and demands it, we better be ready to deliver and the ones who are ready will get rewarded,” he opines.

Doan still has about 5000 acres of cropland, but now has part of it rented out. Still he manages the crop rotation as it’s done in rotation with his cover crops. He started phasing out his tillable cropland and phasing in cover crops about 15 years ago, also as a way to improve soil health and propagate better wildlife habitat. He plants 22 different species, namely legumes, millets and forage Sudan. He’s been able to cut way back on the amount of nitrogen he puts down, but he’d like to eventually cut it out all together and with better and better soil health he intends to get there.

Diversity is what it’s all about, he says.

“When Lewis and Clark came here, the grass was abundant and saddle high and with years and years of season long grazing of kicking livestock out in April and May and coming back in October and November, the species narrowed, bare ground opened, the litter left.”

Coming back to his goal of producing more efficient cattle that fit his system, Doan says he’s still learning about grazing cattle through the winter with little to no supplementation. He’s learned that it’s best to sort of the bottom end and the thinner cows. He’s also learned the importance of having a backup plan for when a three-day blizzard hits.

In general, the calves stay on their mothers till January or February. He says he has less sickness because of it.

Where he has struggled a bit in raising cattle with little to no inputs is in getting heifers bred back.

“Others who are trying this tell me I have to be patient,” he says. “They tell me I have to keep selecting because anymore the industry has the wrong kind of cattle to fit the grass system.”

He says there is no incentive for the seedstock producers to change because their customers still want to buy the biggest bull in the sale, the one with the highest EPD for growth. He blames the system, the fact that producers are paid on weight which encourages inefficient cows that don’t always fit the native environment in which they’re expected to raise a calf. Of late he’s been using bulls from several guys who have been selecting for that more efficient beef cow that can still raise a good calf with little extra inputs.

He either markets his cattle as light yearlings at the local livestock market or holds them over on grass.

“Our calves are small and they’re green, but they will out dollar those calves that have been in a backgrounding yard all winter,” he insists.

Doan acknowledges that this spring was the first in 20 that the grass market was “pretty sour.” He held on to them and sold them when there was a “little bump” in the market and did okay.

To finish them all the way out on grass takes quite a bit, he admits. Currently they’re only selling about 10 percent of that way.

Diversity is not only the name of the game when it comes to his forage resource but with the operation as a whole. Doan and his wife, Renae, have four kids. Their three boys, Jeremy, Jay and Jayce are all back at the operation full time. Their daughter, Shanda Morgan, is involved peripherally.

When the boys came back to the operation, they were told they had to bring something to the table. Jeremy, the oldest, upgraded their hunting program. It’s gone to a self-guided, give them a map of the ranch kind of hunting, to an all-inclusive full-service hunting operation with lodge, food and drink and a guide. They have five full-time guides during the hunting season. They offer waterfowl, duck and geese, hunts as well as trophy mule deer, whitetails package hunts as well as buffalo hunts.

Jay decided that more could be done with the lodge facilities during the off season and so he developed an agritourism business using the lodges as a venue for weddings and corporate events. He also recently started a brewery on the place. They’ve been plagued with the whole coronavirus pandemic like everyone else, but business has begun to pick back up.

Jayce handles the cattle and buffalo operation and is in the process of building a branded grass-finished beef program. They’re working with a small USDA inspected beef processing facility 3.5 hours to the south in Hazen. They’re selling their Black Leg beef at the cooperative grocery store in Bismarck. They hope to capitalize on the fact that they are one of the few to be “Audubon certified.”

Audubon came to Doan and asked him to help design what they called a “bird friendly beef program.” He had his doubts initially because there are admittedly a “big chunk” of Audubon members who believe cows are ruining the planet, but he says the organization is working to change that and Doan is hopeful. In fact, he opines that there is “huge potential” for this bird friendly beef program. Their beef carries a sticker that says “Audubon Certified” bird friendly.

It is typical of most niche type specialty programs in that no GMOs allowed, for example. It is also must be grass-finished or be a forage-based finished product.

“We can’t compete with Walmart on price, but those kinds of customers who buy on price are not our customer anyway,” says Doan. “We’re looking for that customer who is willing to pay a little more for feeling good about what they’re buying. They’ve got to believe in us and what we’re doing and that takes a little time.”

Doan says no family operation is every easy but the one thing he knows for sure is that when the next generation wants to or is ready to come back that’s when it’s time to move over, to get out of the way.

“They don’t want to come back and do it the way we did it,” he says. “They’re going to do things differently and we have to let them.”

He’s also learned that setting up an estate plan that works the way it needs to work is not as easy as he thought it might be. Still he’s up for the challenge as he has nine grandkids thus far and he’s hopeful that they too will want to carry on the legacy of the Black Leg Ranch in the prairie pothole region of North Dakota. That’s what he’s working towards anyway.

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