

Grass Wintering Montana-Style— Sieben Live Stock

by Jim Howell

I first became aware of Chase Hibbard and Sieben Live Stock back in the mid-'90s, when Dan Dagget's excellent book, *Beyond the Rangeland Conflict*, came out. Dagget's intriguing, hopeful account of the ranch's history and successes, accompanied by Jay Dusard's stunning photography, made a firm impression that never left me. Last summer, when Chase (along with fellow Montana rancher and consultant to Sieben Live Stock, Bill Milton) wrote me a letter potentially soliciting my involvement with Adel ranch, I almost couldn't believe it. Based on Dagget's story and Dusard's photos, I had images of an other-worldly paradise up there in Montana. I jumped at the opportunity to become involved, and last November of 2006, made my first trip to the ranch, located in the Rocky Mountain foothills, between Helena and Great Falls.

Sieben Live Stock, the company that runs Adel Ranch, has been in Chase's family for 100 years now. Henry Sieben, Chase's great grandfather, a business-savvy Montana pioneer who made his living in the early days of the freighting industry (with teams of oxen, not tractor-trailers), bought the ranch from the Cannon Sheep and Cattle Company in 1907. Through the years, various adjacent and close-by chunks of real estate have been added to the ranch, which now encompasses a sprawling 70,000 acres (28,000 ha) of some of the West's most productive and beautiful terrain.

Too Much Haying, Not Enough Grazing

Chase's initial correspondence focused on a pair of critical issues—poor utilization of huge swaths of their higher elevation summer country, and a gross over-reliance on making and feeding hay. The ranch has always been profitable, and since initiating a Gus Hormay rest-rotation grazing system in the '80s, has been on steady trend of ecological improvement. But, Chase and the entire management team (which includes wife Emily, brothers Scott and Whit, sisters-in-law Gretchen and Samantha, and ranch managers Jeff and Susan Lechner) were ready to refine and continue improving.

They reasoned that by accessing that unused summer grass, stocking rate (the most fundamental driver of profitability in any grass-based livestock enterprise) could improve, and by transitioning from a haying model to a



This 950-head herd of dry cows was strip grazed on native rangeland from January 1 to May 1 of last winter. To stretch the grass out, they were fed 9 lb (4 kg) a day of hay for the final 60 days. Here they are on the last day in the last strip in the Turtle Butte pasture, just after having been fed their daily hay ration.

winter-grazing model, costs could be slashed astronomically. The potential financial consequences (and improved quality of life that would ensue from a scaled back haying enterprise) of increasing turnover while cutting costs were too huge to continue ignoring.


Their assessment was spot on, but like all of us, they found themselves stuck in their management habits and were struggling with where to start. But after two intense planning sessions, and a winter of experience, they've already made some tremendous progress.

With close to 3,000 stock units (including 1,650 mother cows, yearling heifers, yearling steers, and 1,500 sheep), Adel Ranch has a lot of mouths to feed. In west-central Montana, the dominant paradigm and overriding assumption says that livestock have to be fed hay all winter. For all of Adel Ranch's history, the Sieben and Hibbard Families have taken this methodology to heart, feeding their livestock nearly their total daily demand for at least 130 days through the winter. That works out to about 5,000 tons of hay. That's a mountain of hay to put up. And then you've got to feed it all out again. No thanks.

Some years, this conventional approach is right on. West central Montana can be a nasty place from December through April, with permanent deep snow cover and weeks-in-a-row below zero Fahrenheit. "How often does that



constructed in Durango. Prior to that, slaughtering and processing beefs was a major hassle, and results were inconsistent. This new plant has struggled but is hanging on, and this year generated enough business to break even. Everybody is hopeful that the volume of business will continue to grow and that this obviously vital link in the production chain grows ever more viable. The fact that it's USDA inspected means that individual cuts can be sold direct to the consumer. This takes a huge amount of marketing, as Kay is quick to point out, but the result is much more gross income than selling commodity cattle.

The James Family latched onto Holistic Management in the early '90s. The triple focus on people, finances, and ecology made instant sense, since they were already thinking and working down that path anyway. Now, they had some new tools to help them stay consciously and intentionally on this path. I'm not sure that I've met another ranching family that epitomizes the result of conscious intention more than they do. They're an inspiring example of what's possible when people that love the land and each other work toward a common goal. 



Leader of the James Bunch, David James, explaining the method to his madness.

happen?" I wondered. According to Chase—about once in 40 years! The last time it happened was in 1978.

You mean you put up enough hay every year to cover the worst case scenario, a scenario that might only happen three times a century? That's right. How many days would you have no choice but to feed in a typical winter, due to deep snow? About 30. So if we could figure out how to graze dormant standing forage, you're saying that you'd only need to feed 30 days in a typical winter? Right.

So that's our new assumption. The transition to this new approach is going to be long and complex. Lots of issues need to be resolved. Can dry beef cattle meet their needs on dormant standing forage in this part of Montana? We still need to make hay to at least cover those 30 days of feeding—which hay meadows do we keep haying? What do we do with all the hay meadows we'll no longer need to hay? Keep them in the current alfalfa/grass mix, or replant to something else with better winter grazing potential?

What about that one year in 40, when the roof caves in and we have no choice but to feed? Do we plan to buy hay in those years, or do we keep a steady stockpile of enough hay to deal with the worst case scenario? If we

hold over a stockpile, how do we store it to maintain as much quality as possible? Where do we store it? If we need to build up this reserve, that means we need to keep haying, which means we'll have less winter grazing available, which means we'll still need to feed, which means we're not getting anywhere.

Evolving New Habits

As with any major change in life, it won't be easy. Old habits usually have evolved out of a need to survive. Once we get a survival routine figured out, and once it becomes second nature, it's habit. Even if it's extraordinarily hard work, like putting up and feeding out 5,000 tons of hay, it's almost always easier to continue with an old habit than struggle through the learning curve of creating a new habit, even if the potential payoffs are huge once the kinks are worked out. That's just human nature.

Chase and his team are aware of all this, and have elected to dive in anyway. They are extremely wary of creating a wreck, however, so want to make sure each step toward the new model is well thought out and meticulously planned. Most of the questions raised above don't have clear answers yet, and it will take at least five years, and more likely ten, to work through them all. Intuitively, we all knew that question number one—can we expect dry cows to perform on a diet of dormant, standing forage—had to be answered first. If the cows are going to fall apart, it makes no sense to take another step. So, this winter, we tested our hypothesis that, yes, healthy Angus beef cows should be able to survive on dormant cool season perennial grasses. We didn't do a simple little trial with 20 head, however. We wanted to try something that had real life scale—something that would really push us and teach us something, and that we knew we could replicate. In a nutshell, we all needed some confidence.

Montana Strip Grazing

With the help and guidance of grazing consultant Jim Gerrish, Chase and team (with Jim's son) had built a six-pasture grazing cell on a square mile section (640 acres or 250 ha) of the ranch's far east end during the summer of 2006. Along with four more adjacent sections (2,560 acres or 1,030 ha), we calculated that we had enough standing grass (along with supplemental hay-feeding equating to roughly 25 percent of total feed demand) to winter 900 dry cows from January 1st to May 1st. We created a grazing plan through these five sections, taking in Mullery Creek, Swale, Turtle Butte, and Allen



Strip grazing at high stock density removes one of the great inefficiencies in ranching—overrested, oxidizing, wasted grass. This is on the eastern extreme of the Swale Pasture, about a mile and half from water, and had only been lightly grazed for years. This year's winter grazing trial removed masses of excessive old material from these native rough fescue plants, covering the soil with an excellent layer of mulch, and greatly improving plant vigor. In early April, these plants already had 6 inches of new growth—unheard of in early spring in west central Montana.

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Creek. Outside of Mullery Creek, where Jim Gerrish's two-wire, hi-tensile fences were in place, Jeff and cow foreman, Lloyd, strip grazed off the remainder of the grass with a portable polywire. For the most part, five-day strips were rationed to the one big herd. This resulted in a strip one mile long by one fifth of a mile wide. It took Lloyd about four hours to put up the new fence, and two hours to take down the old fence. From January 1 to February 26, these cows were on 100 percent grazing—no help at all from hay. From Feb. 26 to April 30, an average of 15 lb (6.8 kg) of hay per day had to be fed to stretch out the grass to the end of our planning period.

Other than a couple tough days—the cows spooked one day and made life a little challenging, and the pronghorn antelope tore out the portable wire a few times—it all worked amazingly well. The cattle and the people fell into the routine and everything really clicked. How did the cows do? Another herd of 500 mature cows had been on full feed throughout this period, so we had a good control group to test against. We scrutinized both bunches in mid-April, and the general consensus was that the herd that had been grazing looked to be about a half a body condition score better off (5.5 on a scale of 1 to 9) than the group that had been on full feed. So, we got our answer. Yes, cows can graze through the winter in Montana. And they not only don't suffer, they thrive with good planning and management.

At a feeding rate of only 15 lb./6.8 kg per day for 60 days, total hay fed worked out to about 408 tons for this herd. Under the old program, total hay demand for these cows over this 120-day period would have worked out to 1,620 to 1,800 tons (1.8 to 2.0 tons per cow per winter). That's a savings in hay of 1,212 to 1,392 tons. If a value of \$85 is placed against



Chase Hibbard, great grandson of Sieben Live Stock founder Henry Sieben, in the Mullery Creek Pasture, discussing winter grazing possibilities.

this hay, that's a dollar savings on the order of \$110,000. And, the only reason any feeding was necessary was because we didn't allocate sufficient area to enable this herd to graze 100 percent. If we'd have added another 1,000 acres to this winter grazing cell, these cows could have had a hayless winter. Maybe next year.

This summer, we've come up with a grazing plan that promises to begin addressing the under-utilized summer grass problem. All of the mature cows will be managed in one huge herd, and with only strategic placement of portable hot wires, the Adel Ranch crew is hoping to get cattle into country that has been overrested for decades. As the lessons mount at Sieben Live Stock, I'll keep you posted. 🍷