

Making the Switch

Shifting to regenerative management without big upfront costs and tough trade-offs.

What's the cost? What's the trade-off?

Those are the two primary questions cattle producers ask when considering a transition to regenerative ranching.

Noble Research Institute senior regenerative ranching advisor Mike Porter says ranchers often expect to hear that new management practices automatically come with a prohibitive price tag, but that doesn't have to be the case if you start small and begin with what you have.

"The fact is, if somebody is doing regenerative management appropriately, they should have fewer costs," Porter says. "The whole point is to work with the resources you have."

Porter is leery of anyone who says a rancher needs to make big, upfront infrastructure investments or pay a high price for a new tool or trick in order to consider themselves regenerative.

Trade some productivity for true profitability

Traditional thinking holds that more production is better: run the largest herd possible, weigh the most pounds on sale day, grow the biggest bushel load to put in the bin, measure the success of a day by how many tasks were checked off the list.

However, this productivity mindset does not always pay with true profitability. Instead, the most important, immediate investment may be the time and attention to keep detailed records on exactly where money flows in and out of the ranch business.

"If you start looking — and I mean really looking hard — at exactly what it costs to feed that bale of hay or grow that bushel of grain or send that calf to market, you'll likely become regenerative on your own," Porter says. "It might

become apparent that a lot of those expenses are not actually making money in return."

He points to Noble's Red River Ranch in southern Oklahoma as an example. The 3,000-acre property was traditionally a pecan farm and monoculture bermudagrass grazing and haying operation. The land produced, on average, a little more than 900 tons of hay each year to feed its year-round cow herd, part-time stocker herd and bulls. The operation also exported hay to other Noble ranch properties.

When the managers of Red River Ranch eliminated the haying enterprise to shift to a year-round grazing-based system, they immediately eliminated tens of thousands of dollars of fertilizer, herbicide and haying expenses.

Forage growth previously cut and baled for hay was instead utilized as



Start adaptive grazing with a small group of animals in an easy-to-monitor area. Temporary, electric fencing is an economical way to section off grazing paddocks.

Photo courtesy of Rob Mattson/Noble Research Institute

year-round forage to graze a more diverse herd. The ranch maintained the same number of mature cows and decreased stocker numbers while adding a year-round yearling heifer herd, plus sheep and goat herds. These new income streams better utilized available resources.

Veterinary bills also declined after the switch to regenerative grazing eliminated herbicide application. The ranch manager hypothesized that increased forage diversity provided a better-balanced diet and increased the animals' natural immune response.

The ranch no longer had the hay enterprise, but the managers realized it had acted as a mining operation, exporting much-needed nutrients and fertility from the soil at a rate that was difficult to replace with chemical inputs. The ranch staff also switched from riding a tractor all summer to spending more time with the livestock.

Red River Ranch's stocking rate (animal units) remained at about 94% of its traditional usage, while eliminating costly equipment, labor and input costs associated with the haying operation. In this situation, these were profitable trade-offs in financial and ecological measurements.

"This might not be the case on every ranch," Porter says. "A hay enterprise might make sense in a different context, and it may even involve a little herbicide or fertilizer use. But you've got to really evaluate those decisions and make sure they're in line with soil health principles and ecosystem processes and true profitability."

Look for small, sustainable solutions — not a silver bullet

Someone seeking new solutions in regenerative ranching might assume upfront infrastructure costs in fencing and water are inevitable. Again, Porter cautions against that kind of silver-bullet-solution thinking or dread of high expenses.

If you're moving to a more adaptive grazing approach, you might need to make some investments in electric, temporary fencing, but Porter suggests taking a conservative approach.

"Start small, and start somewhere that's easy to monitor," he says. For instance, try a new grazing system with a small group of animals near the home place where you can keep close track

of the changes in your plant community, the soil and livestock performance.

"Until you do it for a while, you might not know for sure where your water needs to be located or what the flow rate should be or where fences need to be located, so I think it's a big mistake to invest in a bunch of infrastructure upfront," Porter says.

Use what you have until you're confident any investment you make will return profitability. Perhaps you don't have the water infrastructure you need to graze a particular pasture the way you'd like to, but your neighbor does have water near that land. Does it make sense to reduce your own herd and lease that land to the neighbor for a few years while you save the money for the water investment?

Maybe you have heavy woody encroachment in an area, but you don't have the capital to increase stock density enough to trample it down naturally. Or you're in a drought, and prescribed fire isn't an option. You don't want to spend the money or sacrifice ecological function to wage a chemical war.

"Maybe that woody vegetation is supporting some deer, some turkey or quail, and that land is well-suited as a hunting or recreational lease instead," Porter explains.

The point, he says, is rather than asking how another costly input could solve a problem, you should ask yourself: "How can I work with what I have? How would nature solve this problem?"

Invest in new thinking first

"I think it's fair to say that the biggest upfront cost is mentally and emotionally re-thinking the way we've done things," Porter says. "Too often, we feed hay four, five months of the year because we have the equipment to do it. We spray weeds because we don't like to look at them. We fertilize because we like that manicured-looking monoculture. Agriculture is full



Regenerative grazing can support animal health while reducing input costs ranging from herbicide treatments to veterinary bills.

of our own prejudices and biases about how things should be, or how they should look to ourselves and our neighbors."

Change inevitably comes with an emotional price for bucking social stigmas. Overcoming our preconceived notions of what we think we should do, or how our land should look might be easier as we gather educational resources and develop a network of peers aimed at similar goals. It's hard to go against the norm, Porter admits, but acknowledging and accepting that challenge is the start of overcoming it.

"It's like wearing out-of-style clothes, knowing everybody else is looking at you and thinking you're strange or wrong," he says. "But maybe you're the trendsetter, and you've got the style that's going to be in vogue in five years. So, stick with it when you believe it is the right thing to do." **BA**

Editor's Note: This is part of a continuing series of articles about regenerative ranching from Noble Research Institute, long trusted by beef cattle producers for supporting the industry with research, education and consultation. Follow the series in future issues of *Baldy Advantage* and *Hereford World*, as well as in special *1881* podcasts, at Hereford.org. Additional regenerative resources and past articles in the series are also at Noble.org.

Mike Porter recently retired as a senior regenerative ranching advisor from Noble Research Institute after 44 years with the organization, where his work focused on wildlife and rangeland ecology along with regional habitat and plant management.

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