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NEWS RELEASE

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Sustainable grazing systems benefit environment and producer pocketbooks

by Mark Parker

For Terry Gompert, partnering with nature to provide livestock grazing solutions means good stewardship and social responsibility as well as optimizing profitability.

Speaking to more than 130 people gathered for the annual Kansas Graziers' Association Winter Conference in Assaria, Kansas on January 17, the Holistic Management International certified instructor encouraged producers to adhere to grazing basics while exploring creative practices which lead to sustainable economic, environmental and social benefits.

For Gompert, who is also a University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension educator, it begins with the cowherd. The functional cow, he said, proves herself within a given herd and environment.

"You won't know the functional cow in your herd until she's had 10 calves," Gompert asserted. "She's the one who's survived your place and your management. She's not necessarily pretty but she'll have a timely calf every year with no extra special care."

Once that cow has been identified, Gompert suggested, producers should retain her offspring, both male and female. Another important characteristic of a functional cow, he said, is that she is "forage friendly" rather than having been selected for performance on a concentrate-based diet.

"Operators who make the most profit use the least processed feed," Gompert said. "It is a must to let the cow harvest as much (of her diet) as possible."

Other characteristics of the functional cow, according to Gompert, is that she is easy fleshing, low stress, low to moderate in milk production, feminine in her conformation and has coloring which is appropriate for her environment.

Noting that he believes the cows in many herds have gotten too large, Gompert acknowledged that, “just because a cow is small doesn’t mean she’s good, either.”

High volume milk producers, however, are clearly not a good idea, he stressed.

“Milk is antagonistic to profit because the high-producing cow is harder to maintain,” he said. “You want the calf to grow from forages, not from a high volume of milk. Cows that give less milk, but milk that is high in fat, are much better but we have not done a good job of identifying those cows.”

To provide an economical diet for the cow herd, Gompert strongly advised that graziers strive to extend the grazing season. Grazing cool and warm season forages at the proper time and using a little creativity to fill in the gaps, he said, can keep harvested forages to a minimum

“There are all kinds of alternatives,” said Gompert, who is also a cattleman. “The opportunities are amazing.”

Suggesting that beef producers utilize what they have and manage for what they want, he noted that some of his favorite alternatives include strip grazing corn; spring-planted turnips and oats, and skip-row corn with fall turnips as well as summer and winter annuals. In his own operation, Gompert has also grazed other brassicaceous plants such as radishes, kale, rape and rutabaga.

In order to make the most of any forage, Gompert is an advocate of multi-paddock, intensively managed grazing. One of the most common problems he sees with such systems, however, is that developing more paddocks often leads to developing more individual herds.

“We end up using them for convenience sake and the result is that some part of our land is being over-grazed all the time,” he said. “Combine your herds. High density, high impact grazing gives the forage more rest and a lot of healing (of abused land) can take place.”

Relying on high stock density for short grazing periods, Gompert emphasized, better utilizes existing forages as well as providing more time for pastures to recover and attain a higher level of

productivity. He cited several cases in which extremely high stock density was employed to graze out unwanted forages, such as musk thistle, with the eventual result being a more desirable mix of forage plants.

To facilitate intensive grazing systems, Gompert said that farmers and ranchers themselves have developed “ingenious ways” to make cattle and fence moving easier. Tools such as gates on timers, portable water tanks, mini-trucks rigged to drive under fences, four-wheelers adapted for carrying posts and spooling wire and other techniques can enable producers to better utilize their grazing resources, he suggested.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension educator touched on a myriad of practices he’s seen that have helped livestock producers make money. In addition to endorsing Bud Williams marketing schools, his list of money-makers included keyline soil building by using a Yeoman plow; “Bud Box” working pen design; the use of a lead steer to aid in cattle moving; windrow grazing under hot wires; nose rings for weaning calves; controlled bale “grazing” as an alternative to hauling hay bales off of fields; grazing standing crops such as corn, and networking with other producers to gain ideas.

Looking to the future, Gompert said that the current turbulent economic times will create many opportunities. “Be ready,” he urged cattlemen.

Gompert believes low-cost producers and grass-based agriculture will be among the big winners and that society in general will benefit through increased soil quality, better quality food and an improved environment.

In striving to achieve these goals, the educator told the Kansas graziers that everything they do has an impact on the land and on their quality of life. He suggested that keeping the principles of sustainable agriculture at the core of their decision-making and being open to new concepts are the keys to success.

“A tool is neither good nor bad in itself,” Gompert concluded. “It’s a matter of whether that tool, used at that given time, moves you toward your goal.”

The Kansas Graziers' Association is a grassroots organization which links producers and promotes sustainable grazing practices. For more information on KGA, contact Mary Howell by calling 785-292-4955 or cell 785-562-8726; or by email at marshallcofair@networksplus.net.

For more information on the conference and to review Gompert's slides, please see the Kansas Rural Center's website at www.kansasruralcenter.org

The KGA conference was co-sponsored by the KGA; Kansas Rural Center; the Central Kansas District of K-State Research and Extension, and the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops.

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CUTLINES:

KRC-GraziersCrowd-07.jpg:

A crowd of approximately 130 people made their way to Assaria, Kan., recently for the Kansas Graziers' Association Winter Conference.

KRC-GraziersCrowd-07.jpg:

Holistic International Certified Educator and UNL Extension Educator Terry Gompert, right, talks with producers at the recent Kansas Graziers' Association Winter Conference in Assaria, Kan.