

“COWS 101”

In October, 2004, the Flying O Ranch Grazing Committee (Carol Wolf, Andrea Bergman, Sally Welch, Chris Lewis) asked Circle W Herdsman, Larry Myers, to provide us with some background on the Circle W cattle operation, particularly as it relates to the Flying O cattle lease. The meeting was attended by all of the committee members and open to all property owners, a number of whom were able to join us. The discussion was lively and far-ranging. Following is an attempt to summarize some of the information we gained. Please let me know if you have additional questions and we will do our best to “round up” the answers. This is the beginning of the Grazing Committee’s quest to become more informed about this important aspect of life on the Flying O. We welcome everyone’s participation. *Chris Wipff, 12/04.*

LIFE CYCLE OF THE FLYING ‘O’ COWS

There are approximately 225 cows in the Circle W herd, some of which are kept on the Circle W Ranch year-round, and some of which are spread out to graze on other leased properties (including the Flying O) for certain periods during the year.

The cows give birth—calve—on the Circle W over a period of about 90 days during September, October and November.

During calving, the entire herd is gathered on the Circle W, where they can be watched closely and their diets can be supplemented with alfalfa and salt meal or a liquid molasses to provide adequate protein. During this time, the dry grasses have less than 1% protein, which is far from sufficient for their needs.

Around January 1, depending on the grass, part of the herd will be returned to the Flying O. The calves, which will now be 2-3 months old, will have been vaccinated and branded, and the young males will have been castrated before they arrive here.

Generally, there will be 50-55 pairs (cows and their calves), which will stay on the ranch for 4 ½ to 5 months. In January & February, they’ll be attended by two bulls, which will be removed around the first of March, hopefully having done their duty.

In about mid-May, the cows & calves will be rounded up and returned to the Circle W, where the calves will be weaned (separated from their mothers by a fence, but still in proximity). Cows will be pregnancy-checked, and those that are not pregnant will likely be sold, along with most of the calves. About 50% of the young females—heifers—will be kept and raised as potential replacements for older cows in the herd. 30-35% of those may actually make it into the herd.

After a brief rest period on the Circle W, the “dry” cows (pregnant/without calves) will be spread out again to graze on the summer grass. The condition of the grass will determine how many will summer on the Flying O. In July & August of 2003, there were 40 cows on the ranch; in the summer of 2004, which was a dryer year, there were 31.

In late August, all will be gathered and returned once more to North Fork to begin the cycle again.

HOW MANY COWS WILL THE LAND SUPPORT

The Circle W’s rule of thumb for this ranch is 1 cow per 30 acres. According to Larry, the land could conceivably support nearly twice that number during the growing season. However, by the end of the growing season, many parts of the ranch would be grazed bare. There would be no dry grasses to support summer grazing, and some plants—particularly fine-stemmed grasses and some species of wildflowers—could be lost from the ecosystem entirely.

While the summer grasses provide bulk and fiber, they are low in protein, so the cows that summer on the Flying O typically require a protein supplement. This is delivered in the form of salt meal blocks or molasses, which is put out in large tubs. *(Larry cautions horse owners that the molasses in these tubs contains the synthetic additive Urea, which could be toxic to horses if eaten in large amounts.)*

In some cases, the cows’ summer diet will also need to be supplemented with hay. But, Larry tries to avoid this on the Flying O in order to keep the herd from congregating in one spot, which is hard on the ground.

WHAT ABOUT WATER

During the winter and spring, water for cattle is plentiful in Flying O creeks and springs. However, during the summer it can become scarce, limited to a handful of springs and leakage from ponds. During the summer, a single cow will drink an average of 15 gallons of water per day, sometimes traveling long distances to find it.

The Circle W does not use the Club House pond for cattle, except when the herd is gathered, generally in late Spring. The enclosed pond area will then become a “gathering field” in which the cows will typically be kept overnight before being moved down the hill to loading facilities off Road 200.

In the summer of 2004, the lack of water became so acute that a watering trough was placed near the well adjacent to the barn on lot 27, where cows were already attracted by the scent of water in the horse pens. This trough will be maintained and well-water from this source may be used as future needs dictate.

Some owners have expressed a willingness to develop water for cattle on their parcels, which would be welcomed by the herdsman and certainly by the cows.

OTHER FACILITIES

In addition to the fenced area of the pond & clubhouse, which is used as a gathering field, and the riding arena, which could be used to hold and/or separate cows if need be, the Flying O has only one other facility—the barn—that could be used by the cattlemen. However, our barn is not specifically equipped for working cattle and, since owners use it for horses, the Circle W uses it only rarely to pen and/or facilitate the loading of a few cattle for transport.

In late spring, when the entire herd must be moved back to North Fork, the Circle W makes arrangements with the Bigelow ranch in O'Neals and herds the cows and calves down the road to their facilities for sorting and loading. Other activities such as branding, vaccinating and castrating are taken care of on the Wyle ranch.

LEASE BASIS

The basis for the Circle W cattle lease with the Flying O is \$3.50 per acre, paid on the GROSS ACREAGE of the ranch (1,400 acres), minus approximately 40 acres that are outside the gate -- Lot 34 (Buchnoff) and part of Lot 33 (Tichnor).^{*} No deductions have been made for portions of the ranch devoted to roads or fenced by individual property owners. Larry notes that a higher rate per acre might be obtained, but that rate would apply to “net acres.” The total amount of \$4,760.00 is paid to the Association in one lump sum at the beginning of the rental year (January).

(This south end of the ranch is intersected by Circle J Ranch Road and is open at the road. Given the Circle J traffic, a gate has not been deemed practical. The other alternative—a cattle guard—would cost several thousand dollars to install. So, for now, this land is not a part of the leasable acreage.)*

FEDERAL EQUIP PROGRAM GRANT

This coming year, the Flying O will begin to benefit from EQUIP, a five-year US Department of Agriculture grant program for the improvement of grazing lands. Over the next five years, the Flying O stands to receive as much as \$96,000 in USDA matching funds for the removal and spraying of brush on the ranch to open up land and improve grazing. This may translate into higher lease revenues in the future, as more viable grazing land becomes available. Importantly, less brush will also mean less fuel for wildfires.

This contract is between the NRCS and the Circle W which, two years ago when the grant application was made, was still majority owner on the Flying O. And it must be administered by the Circle W. The selection of parcels for inclusion in the program was based upon factors in place at that time, including where the most benefit for grazing would be achieved. Some parcels, for example, had been brushed earlier and didn't need much work, others would provide little benefit for grazing as they're too steep/rocky,etc.

The selections and scope-of-work was reviewed and approved by USDA-NRCS personnel based on the program guidelines.

HORSES & COWS

Several Flying O property owners expressed the desire to graze their horses freely on the ranch. As herdsman, Larry does not believe this is a compatible use, as it would increase competition for limited grasses and complicate management of the herd on the leased land. This is already a delicate balancing act, requiring careful calculation of the number of cows the grass will sustain and for how long, when they can be brought to the ranch and when they should be removed, as well as when and how their diets must be supplemented.

According to Larry, if the rule of thumb for good cattle management on the Flying O is one cow or cow/calf combination per 30-acres, the rule of thumb for grazing horses would be one horse per 45 acres.

Based on how much grass consumed on average over 30 days, one cow or one cow/calf combination is considered *one animal unit*. One horse will consumer half-again as much grass in 30 days, and is therefore considered *one and a half animal units*.

To illustrate the impact of horse vs. cattle grazing on the land over the period of one year, Larry calculated that the Circle W cows grazed on the Flying O last year added up to 352 animal units. By comparison, if each of the ranch's 34 parcels grazed just one horse each, the animal units consumed in one year would be closer to 612.

In effect, by leasing the gross acreage of the Flying O, our cattle tenant has "bought the grass." This includes the grass in the fenced area of the pond/clubhouse, which is used on occasion as a "gathering field for the cows." Larry requests that horse owners not allow this area to be grazed down so that grass remains available for the cows when needed. *(Please note that the ranch's approved barn policies currently allow for "supervised turnouts" of horses in this area. The intention is to allow the area to be use for exercise purposes when it does not interfere with other people's use of property. Horses are not supposed to be left unattended or turned out to graze for extended periods.)*

According to the CC&Rs, property owners do have the option of fencing an area or areas of their individual properties (up to 10 acres), in which they could graze their own animals.

"DRAWBACKS" TO CATTLE GRAZING ON THE FLYING O

From a cattleman's perspective, there are some drawbacks to leasing the Flying O for cattle grazing. The absence of actual facilities for working the cattle is one. Lack of water in the summer is another. But, probably the biggest drawback is *us*. The more of us there are, the greater danger we pose to the cattle: our construction sites, our cars on

the road, our contractors and vendors in and out of the gates. It is extremely important that we keep the safety of our “tenants” in mind on a day-to-day basis.

In addition, as our community has grown and areas have been fenced off, the land available for cattle grazing has been somewhat diminished. The Circle W has not deducted acreage from the lease for these losses. One concern for the future is the amount of new housing development on the properties and, depending on owners’ choices, the potential for many more acres to be taken out of the equation. A significant loss of acres could reduce the value of the Flying O as a whole for grazing purposes.

COMMUNICATION

Everyone who attended this meeting – Committee members, community members and Larry Myers – agreed that shared information and good communication between us is essential to a successful lease arrangement. Some of this expected communication will be reflected in the formal lease agreement. The Board is encouraged to appoint a liaison to be in regular communication with Larry and help make sure that information goes both ways between the community and the lease holder.

Owners are encouraged to report any problems or concerns and may contact Larry at the Circle W office (559)877-4516.

A LITTLE MORE BACKGROUND ON THE CIRCLE W

I asked Stephen Wyle to give us a little more background on the Circle W cattle operation and its relationship to the Flying O over time. Thank you, Stephen, for the following:

The Wyle’s purchased the Flying-O property in 1964. Initially it was used to Pasture part of our registered Black Angus herd. At that time we were raising purebred cattle and showing at all the major western livestock shows. When that program ended we leased the land to others for grazing. One man, Pierre [don't know how to spell his last name], who had leased the land for quite a while, was killed when his horse reared and fell over backward on top of him, which effectively ended that lease. We then resumed putting our cattle on the property, although by then we were running a commercial operation. When the Flying-O development got started, following the first sales of property, we began leasing the land on an informal basis from the Association, which has continued through this year.

The original 1,200 acres of the Circle-W was purchased in 1959. Subsequent additions have raised the total acreage to over 4,000. We have more or less been in the cattle business since the early '60s. As I mentioned above, we started with a registered Angus business. We then tried running feeder cattle for a while both on the ranch and on permanent pasture that we were

renting around Madera. That business evolved into a cow/calf operation that has continued to the present day. The addition of Larry Meyers has greatly professionalized our operation, and the results can be seen in the quality of the cows and calves that are on both our ranch and the Flying-O.