Beyond the Here and Now

Living Laboratory concepts focus on the long game — and Jeffrey Geider says you should, too.

By Katrina Huffstutler

Editor's note: *This is the sixth and final installment in a series on the Texas Christian University Institute of Ranch Management Living Laboratory. If you're just joining us, be sure to catch up on the first five at thecattlemanmagazine.com.*

It's easy to miss the forest for the trees. Or, west of I-35, the rangeland for the mesquite.

But Jeffrey Geider, Texas Christian University's William Watt Matthews Director of the Institute of Ranch Management, says good ranch management requires a broad view — and a long-term plan.

"A lot of times, whether we're talking about managing ranches or really any type of business, we tend to focus on the immediate, what's right here in front of us," he says. "We don't spend the amount of time we should going through the planning process and saying, 'What could this look like 5, 10 or 15 years down the road?'"

Jon Taggart, who ranches on the same land as the Living Laboratory, does, though. And so do most of the other top ranch managers who come to Geider's mind. He says it's critical for landowners to break that paradigm and get to where they're not just ranching from month to month, year to year.

"The things we do and the decisions we make today are going to impact our operations five years from now," Geider says. "Yes, you have day-to-day operations, you have to be concerned about what's happening today and tomorrow and working with markets and droughts and all the rest of it. But there needs to be an adequate amount of time spent developing plans and systems."

He says that's what they teach in the ranch management program and how the living laboratory is run — thinking about long-term objectives. Because, he says, at the end of the day, the focus must be on sustainability.

"We're trying to stay in business, and to do that, we have to care for all of those resources that we've been talking about over the last few issues," Geider says. "The human resources, natural resources, and financial resources."

He says the salient message of the Living Laboratory is this: invest the time to develop a long-term plan yet understand you may have to vary from that plan based on markets and weather and other outside forces. ➤

"At least if there's a plan in place," Geider says, "you have goals and objectives and you can try to meet those. And then, in addition to that, put in benchmarks or measuring systems that allow you just to judge or determine whether you're still headed in the right direction and whether you're gaining ground, which is what we've been trying to do through this living laboratory process."

Sustainability isn't a target, though, he explains. It's a process. While ranches may think if they do A, B and C, they'll be sustainable, there are too many variables out of our control. That means, to be successful, ranchers must figure out how to control what they can and adjust when things like weather don't go their way.

The Living Laboratory focuses on finding that sweet spot between dedicated planning and flexibility and has done so by thinking outside of the box.

"We brought in a lot of different perspectives — academics, government officials, NRCS people, botanists — and each of them have shed some light on issues that aren't typically on a cattleman's radar," Geider says.

But there were other benefits, too.

"Subliminally, one of our goals was to engage multiple segments of society that mostly have the same fundamental goals, but different ways to achieve them," he says. "Because we all have different methods, that can create misunderstandings. We wanted to build those bridges and just all sit around the same table. We can say, 'You know what? We're environmentalists, too. We're conservationists, too. How can we all compromise and work toward our mutual goals of clean water, good soils, all that kind of stuff?' And we've been lucky, because we've encountered open minds and people outside of our industry who have come to that table and said, 'Yeah, we see what you're trying to do.'"

While this series on the TCU Institute of Ranch Management Living Laboratory wraps up, the laboratory itself is still in its early stages. In the future, Geider hopes to have sites all over the world, to help a larger group of cattlemen make sound decisions with lasting, positive effects. He also hopes to develop a digital platform for sharing findings from the laboratory with interested ranchers.

"We know not all of our findings will be relevant for everyone," he says. "But our hope is they'll be interested in reading them and then adapting the recommended practices to fit their needs. That they'll think, 'OK, I don't have to do all 10 things, but three or four of these will work,' and they'll improve their bottom line as a result." ▮

A Student's Perspective

By Alyssa Austin

When I think of agriculture, I think of cattle, chickens, goats and a rancher with a nice cowboy hat. As picturesque as this may be, ranching is much more than raising livestock.

The farming and ranching industries provide food for the global population. Some believe these are established methods and should be encouraged. Others within the environmental sector believe that agriculture should be regulated, and the size of its operations reduced. There's no doubt agriculture consumes a vast amount of water and has negative byproducts such as excess nitrogen, herbicides and pesticides in our water. Agriculture also causes soil erosion when crops are incorrectly managed, and species richness is reduced by monoculture farming. But whichever side of the argument you favor, the human population must have food to eat and land for housing. The question is, how can this be accomplished efficiently and sustainably?

Prior to working with the Institute of Ranch Management, I wasn't fully aware of the great impact of sustainable ranching and farming operations. My perspective has completely changed. Through my graduate assistantship, I have worked on Burgundy Pasture Beef's cattle operation, where I collected soil samples, took plant species richness surveys, gathered weather data and observed the resurgent growth of native grass species in a sustainable ranching environment. I've watched many plant species grow abundantly on that ranch, while in the next pasture, there is little plant diversity.

The ranchers at Burgundy Pasture Beef carefully and strategically re-seed native grasses, rotate their cattle, monitor their soil health and do not use pesticides; all of these play a role in their healthy and beautiful pastures. Through proper land management, they are transforming what was a monoculture, an

eroding, low-nutrient landscape, into a nutrient-dense, thriving pasturage with an increasing population of native grasses.

Burgundy Pasture Beef is a conservation-minded ranching operation, accomplishing two important tasks simultaneously; it provides for their family by producing and bringing quality beef to market, while setting an example of sustainable ranching.

Burgundy Pasture Beef shows a profit by producing a product with a competitive edge, so the takeaway is that environmental stewardship and positive cash flows are simultaneously achievable. The goal of every ranching operation is to be profitable but often environmental stewardship is not at the top of the to-do list. Burgundy Pasture Beef is reversing this, displaying a business model that benefits financially from sustainable ranching. It saves overhead costs by eliminating the need for pesticides, lowering their costs in required supplemental feeding, and lessening their vet bills to nearly zero with their strong, healthy cattle.

They aren't the only operation that can achieve this business model; anyone can begin to alter their methods and see the impact it has on their ranches.

Imagine the resurgence of native grasses, increase in net profits and the overall benefits to the environment if ranchers all over the country began to alter their practices!

As ranchers and environmentalists, we are on the same team; each one desires to create a better world by understanding the role we play in garnering the earth's fruits while simultaneously protecting them. And I now have the tools to take this message of applied conservation into the world.

Alyssa Austin is a Master of Engineering Management candidate and graduate assistant in Texas Christian University's Department of Environmental Sciences.