



From left are Jeff Geider and ranchers Ben and Jon Taggart, Grandview. Geider is the William Watt Matthews Director of the Institute of Ranch Management.

Live and Learn

Partnership turns the ranch into a research lab — and all cattlemen can benefit from the findings

By Katrina Huffstutler

Editor's note: This piece is the first in a series of six on the Texas Christian University Institute of Ranch Management Living Laboratory. In this month's installment, we will introduce you to the laboratory. Over the next few months, we will dive deeper into what they are doing and learning along the way.

About 40 miles south of the Texas Christian University campus in Fort Worth, Jon Taggart finishes a couple of thousand head of calves on rolling prairies. The cattle will eventually be harvested for his Burgundy Pasture Beef brand, which he sells direct to consumers in his three stores in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. It is not your typical ranch but no doubt one with implications that work across the board. After all, caring for the ground and grass is never more

important than when you are finishing cattle on it.

Texas Christian University Institute of Ranch Management students have visited the grass-fed operation for 17 years, benefiting from Taggart's experience and expertise in everything from environmental stewardship to niche marketing. But thanks to a more formal partnership, the two organizations, along with the Texas Christian University Department of Environmental Sciences, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services, and the Botanical Research Institute of Texas, have recently transformed Taggart's land into the Texas Christian University Living Laboratory. It is not just an arrangement that benefits ranch management students, though — the findings are meant to help cattlemen all over the region improve their management practices, sustainability, and bottom lines.

Use what works, modify what doesn't

But Jeffrey Geider, Texas Christian University's William Watt Matthews Director of the Institute of Ranch Management, says they are not trying to be prescriptive with the information they will share.

"We're not trying to suggest to everybody, 'Just go do this,'" Geider says. "Instead, we're saying, 'Let's raise the level of awareness on some of these basic management principles that can really enhance the productivity and the sustainability of the natural resource itself.' We just want other ranchers and other landowners to be able to take whatever comes from it and apply it to their operation."

Not everything they do and learn is going to apply everywhere, and that's OK. In fact, it means the potential for additional sites to encompass more research.

Geider says the project is going international, with Living Laboratories to come in Central America, South America, and Scotland next.

"The idea is that even though we all have vastly different ecosystems, we're trying to identify the basic management principles that can manage all of those different ecosystems. We want the layman to take that information and say, 'OK, I think I can adapt this practice to my operation with simple modifications.'"

Banking on a better approach

Even more, it is about encouraging cattlemen to analyze their natural resources and taking a portfolio management approach to ranching.

"In ranching operations, the portfolio we're talking about includes human resources, financial resources, and natural resources," Geider says. "And just like with your investments, this idea of portfolio management means making decisions based on short- and long-term objectives and balancing risk versus performance."

He says managing as a portfolio can create a resilient ranch business that can sustain itself through environmental challenges (like a drought) or financial challenges (a market downturn or unexpected expenses). Burgundy Pasture Beef is a good example of this. Back in 2012 when most Texas ranchers were forced to downsize dramatically, Taggart did not have to sell a single animal.

"When you're managing your forages the right way, you can minimize your risk dramatically," Geider says.

From farm to forage and far beyond

When Jon Taggart took over his property about 20 years ago, it was mostly farmland, which is typical for

that part of the state. It had been for a long time, but Geider says much of it should not have been — also typical. But over the last two decades, the cattleman has worked to transform it all back to native pasture. In doing that, Geider says, he has gotten away from the monocultures and vastly improved the biodiversity on his land.

"He's growing multiple species of grasses and diverse types of plants, not only for forage production but also for pollinators and for the wildlife population," Geider says. "You know, it really becomes a very diverse ecosystem, and that's what we're trying to manage." ►

It makes for the perfect Living Laboratory, he explains, and the progression from a ranch they visit on field trips, to a ranch they study year-round, made perfect sense.

"In the ranch management program, we have been teaching these things forever," Geider says. "And we just thought, what a great opportunity to collect some data and show that these things really do work and really do have an application in the real world."

Early lessons

Only about two years into the Texas Christian University Living Laboratory, there is still a lot of data to collect and analyze. But Geider says they have already been able to show that ranching can be sustainable and in line with environmental management, ranching can be an economically plausible business, and these management practices are applicable to all types of operations in all types of environments.

He recommends that cattlemen who wish to apply the management practices of Taggart and Texas Christian University to their own businesses start by taking an honest assessment.

"Think about where you are now and where you want to be," Geider says. "Take inventories — a human inventory, a financial inventory, and a natural resources inventory, which includes both a forage and plant population assessment. Next, define your goals. Identify the type of life you would like to live and determine the kind of business you want to develop."

He says the goal is to focus on the future.

"Weather will change, markets will change," Geider says. "So, we want to take a look at multiple types of management practices — we could focus on grazing systems, for example. How do we go in and calculate how much forage we have, and what the carrying capacity is, and how do we stock it in terms of sustainability? And how can that be maintained

over a lengthy period of time? I think that's a very important concept, particularly in agriculture, where people tend to, not necessarily intentionally, but they tend to maximize production rather than optimize. We want to optimize it so we can be sustainable long-term."

He says the system encourages cattlemen to work toward being a least-cost producer but stresses that it's not a one-time fix.

"This is a process," Geider says. "There is a beginning, but there is not an end."

Coming up next month: It all started with questions... ■