K-STATE Research and Extension | Meadowlark District

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Take Away from a Trip to Nebraska

If you know me, you know I have great appreciation for the ruminate animal and their ability to convert sunlight into food through the power of the rumen, arguably as effectively as any agriculture system. This week I attended the Nebraska Grazing Conference in Kearney, which has the wheels in my mind spinning on several of the topics and how to implement them for Meadowlark producers. Over the next couple weeks, I plan to address some of these, but will do a quick summary of emergent topics discussed. WARNING, I'll give the same disclaimer as speaker Steve Kenyon gave, some of this might offend the reader. That's not my goal, but hopefully, it helps you think deeper and/ or broader. So, what were some of the emergent issues?

Grasslands Biome Collapse. The great plains have some of the last remaining, wide-spread grassland ecosystems in the world and they are in trouble! The greatest threats to the grassland biome are: land use (tillage and housing development namely) and woody encroachment. There is little doubt that tackling the first can get me into trouble, even with good friends, so my focus in the future will be on the woody encroachment side. Estimates are that 132 million acres in the Great Plains are in a direct threat from woody invasion, most notably eastern red cedar. Next week we'll pick back up on this topic, but I came home wanting to cut down the cedar trees in my windbreak, write a burn plan and already long-hated honey locust!

Old World Bluestem and other invasive species. Some producers are very well acquainted with some of the non-native, bluestem grass species. Yellow Bluestem, Caucasian Bluestem, Broomsedge Bluestem are all common terms to describe the class of problematic introduced plants. Like many non-natives, these are grasses introduced into the United States with the hope of serving specific purposes, but for one reason or another, they have negative side-effects and out compete our natives. There is encouraging news in fighting Old World Bluestems, much of which comes from work at the K-State Research Center in Hays. This crowd also considered smooth brome as invasive, so guess it's all in your perspective! The first two topics are a bit negative and scary, the next two have more of an optimistic look.

Collaborative Adaptative Management Strategies. Simply defined, this is a "learn by doing, with structured decision making" approach to land management. Some interesting research was shared from both the University of Nebraska and USDA Agriculture Resource Service in Colorado. The big picture of the research, was long-term sustainability of grazing systems, focusing on: pasture evaluation, woody encroachment control, heterogeneity of plant species, livestock performance and building soil.

Regenerative Agriculture. Steven Kenyon, Alberta, Canada, challenged many traditional production practices and schools of thought on topics ranging from; the most important ranch employees are insects, microbes and other 'critters', monocultures are ugly, predators are beneficial, fertility comes from air not soil and many other thought-provoking topics. Being part of a researched based system, I always want to see replicated data, but what was shared was very interesting, delivered in an entertaining way and has me wanting to try some practices.

Outside of the conference itself, although we need another round of rain, I felt blessed to see how good things look at home compared to most of my drive across northern Kansas and southern Nebraska. If you've read this far, I appreciate you hanging with me on this different approach to a news article, as promised, more to come on some of the topics above. Like my Dad always used to say, "you never learn anything staying at home" and I've appreciated the opportunities Extension provides to continually learn. If you want to review proceedings from the Nebraska Grazing Conference, please visit: https://grassland.unl.edu/nebraska-grazing-conference