

# Grass Heritage

*Healthy pastures uphold ranch tradition.*

*Don Nelson (right) and his son, Jamie, carry on with great pride the Palmer Ranch's land-stewardship legacy.*



As dawn creates its palette, Don Nelson settles into his saddle. He'll spend the day surrounded by cattle and

grass-covered slopes.

Civil War veterans homesteaded the Flinthills Beefmaster Palmer Ranch, south of Beaumont, Kansas, but the rocky soil proved unfit for farming. Eventually, railroads brought opportunists like Joseph Porter, who reclaimed these land deeds, built an unloading station and hundreds of pens where livestock were fed and watered on their way to eastern markets. When demand for resting points died out, he used the tall grass country to fatten steers each summer.

Today, Porter's grandson, Everett A. Palmer, owns the property. Shaped like an hourglass, the ranch extends five miles from north to south and covers 5,120 acres. It's here where Nelson oversees 400 Beefmaster cows, plus breeding stock he sells commercially. Each spring the ranch purchases 700 to 800 stockers from Ohio and Mississippi. After 90 days on native pasture, they ship to a western feedlot.

## Top of the line

Beefmaster bulls first arrived at the Palmer Ranch in 1975. Foundation stock came from the Lasater Ranch in Mathison, Colorado.

"Everyone takes pride in the cattle here," says ranch manager Nelson. "Durable bloodlines and superior genetics are the cornerstones for our success."

Nelson and his son, Jamie, stick to strict culling standards. For example, an index system tracks all bulls. If scores fall below 90 percent, they're sold for slaughter or through the local sale barn. Cows must raise a marketable calf or they leave the herd.

The ranch maintains a split calving cycle. Two-thirds of the herd drops newborns from March 1 to May 1. Fall calving begins August 20. They sell the top 10 percent of the bull crop to purebred and commercial breeders across the country and retain 75 to 100 replacement heifers.

After weaning in mid-October, calves receive a commercial starter ration. Replacements return to pasture. Steer calves get 2 to 3 lbs of cake per day, plus hay when it snows. Come spring, yearling steers and non-replacement

heifers return to grass before moving to Lane County Feeders in Dighton on August 1.

## Taking no chances

Grass management sets the table for livestock performance on the Palmer Ranch. Fire has always been the primary method to enhance forage production in this area, but Nelson faced a new challenge in 1999.

Patches of ironweed, broomweed and ragweeds popped up in some spots and threatened native big bluestem. "I worried about these lingering problems, so I sought advice from my Dow AgroSciences sales rep," he says.

In May, Scott Heinen from Nemaha Valley Aerial in St. Marys, treated 570 acres with 1 quart of Grazon P+D herbicide per acre. To stop assorted patches of brush, he applied Grazon plus Remedy herbicide.

Dramatic changes followed. "Grazon smoked those weeds, especially wild alfalfa," Nelson says. After a couple of weeks, grass grew much thicker in the treated areas.

"Our livelihood depends on maintaining optimum forage quality. There can't be any roadblocks during the grazing season," he adds. "When grass has to compete for nutrients and moisture, it shows up in the cow and her calf. Milk production suffers and weaning weights decline."

The news is worse if Nelson has to decrease stocking rates from 7 acres to 8 acres per pair. Running 50 fewer calves from birth through weaning takes nearly \$25,000 in gross income off the bottom line.

Margins also deteriorate on stockers. Dropping the stocking rate by a half-acre reduces the season's carrying capacity by 123 head. Forfeiting 200 lbs of potential gain per animal at \$85/cwt amounts to more than \$20,000 in lost beef production. Finding enough grass to compensate for these losses – either by renting or purchasing additional ground – is time consuming and costly.

"Switching to herbicides has made a difference because Grazon and Remedy offer long-term control of all our key weeds," Nelson says.

"My grandfather understood that grass was the heart, soul and heritage of this ranch," notes Everett Palmer, now 86 years old. "The family knows what stewardship means, and we take this responsibility seriously." ■