

A SENSE OF PLACE BIG BLUFF RANCH

BY TYLER DAWLEY



SUMMER

Whatever the temperature says, it is summer time. For most people, when the temperature reaches a certain degree, summer has officially begun. For this stockman grassfarmer, summer begins when life becomes even more hectic than in spring. The farmer doesn't have one thing that she has to keep track of but rather many. Among others, she has to be accountant, soil scientist, agronomist, veterinarian, salesman, mechanic, plumber, electrician, etc. Many of those skill sets are used every day, and using them all in one day is not unheard of. How can anyone keep a sane mind with all those thoughts running through it?

One quick answer to my sanity is family and friends. People and relationships keep me grounded in reality. We had a wonderful grounding opportunity here at the ranch

over Memorial Day. It was my grandfather's 90th birthday and we managed to get every single family member here, all of his kids and their spouses, all of his grandkids, his first great grandkid, twenty-two family members in all. We spent the weekend having fun, which among my family means projects and eating, so the doors were painted and the kitchen was well used. For his birthday party, we cooked ranch lamb chops and leg of lamb. Grampa said it "was luxurious." Not bad to impress someone who has eaten so much good food in his life.

If you read my spring article in this magazine, you know my mind works from the ground up. During the summer, we have two types of forage on the ranch, irrigated pasture and dry rangeland, each with its own set of requirements. The

dry rangeland prompts a game of careful rationing, and our irrigated pasture allows a continuation of our spring growth.

We have about sixty acres of irrigated pasture, which is a wonderful thing to have. Our grassfed operation needs to have green grass to harvest off of. In the spring, when everything is green, that is not too hard to arrange. Once spring turns to summer on the range, it is impossible to harvest a quality grassfed product. But down on the pasture, with irrigation, we can continue spring well into summer. All of the same thought processes apply to irrigated pasture as to green rangeland: don't remove too many solar panels (plant leaves), allow the plants enough time to regrow, and add a water component, making sure that the soil is always moist. By managing these three main components, along with a host of sub-components, I can take spring growth well into summer.

Management of the first two components involves controlling how the livestock graze the pasture. On irrigated pasture that control comes from lots of temporary electric fencing, which I use to divide the fields into small grazable chunks. As I build the fences, I have plenty of time to do some figuring. One figure I always find amazing is that I put up and take down about thirty miles of this temporary fencing over a summer. That is a lot of fencing; stretched end to end that fence would reach to Red Bluff from the ranch.

Also, I spend about two hours a day changing irrigation pipe. Nothing like trudging back and forth for hours changing pipe to make a grassfarmer wish for a solidset system that involves no walking. It may sound like I spend a lot of time in the irrigated pasture, and I do, but only a small portion of the ranch is irrigated, and I can't focus only on the green grass.

My focus must also be out on the range, where, when green spring turns to brown summer, we change from growing season management to a rationing regime. Once the range turns brown, essentially what we have is hay that hasn't been put in a barn. We know that brown forage is all that we are going to have until next fall, and we need to manage it so we make it last until then. We measure how much forage we have by pretending to be a cow and figuring how much area she/we would need to eat for a day, then we do some calculations that will tell us how much forage we have on the entire ranch till next fall (how much hay we have in our fictional barn). Next we do more calculations that tell us how much forage our cattle, sheep, and wildlife will need until the next green season (how much hay we need to feed them). Once we have and compare those two numbers (what we have in the fictional barn and how much we need in that barn), we can tell if we have extra, enough, or not enough feed for the year. Usually, we have just enough feed and use irrigated pasture to fill in for a lack of brown forage.





Once we know that we have enough forage for our animals, we need to start managing how the livestock eat it. Unfortunately, we can't graze it the same way we graze our spring growth for two reasons. One, if we let the livestock graze only 50% of the forage available, they will trample the rest. In the spring, the plants will regrow from trampling. In the summer, once trampled the plants are no longer palatable to livestock; they are wasted feed. We need to get the animals to eat all of the forage before moving on to the next field to avoid waste. Two, if we move the livestock too often in the summer, we will end up killing our native perennial plant population through over-grazing. These natives are so wonderful and interesting that I don't have time to even scratch the surface. They are so wonderful that our whole brown season management is based around encouraging their growth and propagation. The problem is that in the summer 90% of the range is dead forage, but the remaining 10% of the range is green growing native perennials. How do I fully graze the brown forage while not overgrazing the growing perennials?

The best way to graze on brown forage is high-density short duration grazing. This is how we manage the livestock in the summer. Under high density grazing the livestock are put in an area small enough that they begin to think, "I don't want to let that other animal get this bite, so I better eat it before she does," which means they will eat everything and not waste any feed. Short duration means that livestock graze a brown field only once or twice during the entire brown

season. This type of grazing management is what would have been happening back when the wolves were still chasing the antelope and elk across our property. All we are doing is trying to recreate that style of grazing.

One step up from the grass in my management matrix is the livestock, and we have plenty of new livestock. All of the births are over for the year. We know how many calves and lambs we have. Next on the list of tasks is to mark and brand the calves and work the lambs. Within the next month, they will all have nice new earrings and a permanent number in our system. Yes, big brother does exist on ranches.

One new part of the livestock is a young guardian dog for the sheep. He came with the name Diego, and it seems to be sticking. People always ask how I train these dogs. Luckily, not much training is necessary. It is mostly a matter of instinct and bonding. The instinct comes from thousands of years of breeding. They just know how to guard, and it can't be trained. Bonding happens in many animals. In dogs, it happens at about eight weeks of age. This is the time when they figure out who is family. House dogs learn that humans are family. Livestock guardian dogs learn that sheep are family. To help Diego learn this lesson, I have him in a field with my rams. He is now about thirteen weeks old and already devoted to his rams. He displays some very good guarding instincts. For a guard dog, this means that he is alert to changes in his environment and barks at whatever change that is. When I first put some cows in the field with him and his rams, he went nuts, and it was hilarious, a little guardian pup weighing

around thirty pounds trying to chase off two bulls that weigh close to a ton each. With that sort of gumption, he will be a great dog when he grows up. Plus he is a puppy, and puppies are always fun to have around.

Another new addition to the ranch is ninety-five pastured poultry broilers. I have wanted to raise pastured poultry for years but just haven't had the time or energy. This summer, a buddy and I just decided to do it. We have built a mobile hoop house out of some wire panels and have been moving the hoop house across the irrigated pasture. A hoop house is a portable, movable chicken coop, made of galvanized wire panels bent in a hoop and raised off the ground so that the hoop coop can be easily dragged to a new area of pasture each day. Raising poultry in this way is fantastic for the pasture, the birds, and us. The pasture gets fertilized from the broilers' manure. The broilers get to eat bugs and grass and act like the chickens that they are. We benefit because the meat produced is healthier for us and tastes like chicken. You don't know what chicken really is until you try some pastured poultry. This summer is mostly a learning experience so that next fall we can ramp up our operation.

One step beyond grass and animals is marketing. I love the production end of what I do, but at some point I need to sell something. Luckily, I don't need to be a slick slimy salesman. I only need to be myself and have something for a customer to buy, both of which are easy to accomplish. So this is why you see me at the farmers' markets in Chico and Redding. I am funding my dream of ranch life and helping you fuel your life with wonderfully healthy and tasty meat. Come by and say hi. Watch out; I may talk you into trying some of our meat.

These are some the major happenings of summer life on the ranch. With irrigating, branding the cattle and working the lambs, moving the livestock and fencing new pasture, toting the hoop coop, finishing the animals for harvest, supervising harvest, readying for market, and all of the fix-it

opportunities that come with these activities, sometimes it feels as if I am being pulled a dozen different directions at one time. I never have a chance to settle in on one task and complete it, because I am always pulled off by the needs of something else. Some might call it a form of schizophrenia, but I don't. I believe that life is not, at its root, a schizophrenic experience. I prefer to see it like this. Each task in life falls on a music staff (what musical notes are written on). Each time I work on a task, it becomes a note there. As I go through the day, I am putting more and more notes on the staff. At the end of the day, the musical score shows how the notes rise and fall in tone and increase and decrease in tempo. That is how my ranch life feels. At the end of each day, I can hear and feel the pace and passion of my life in those notes, in summer, the melody from my tasks on the dry brown rangeland. 🐾

Tyler Dawley and his parents Frank and Vicky manage Big Bluff Ranch, outside of Red Bluff. They use a thought model known as Holistic Management to help them make decisions that honor the three bottom lines: economical, ecological, and societal. Under this model, they have created a healthy rangeland that supports a passel of happy, healthy animals, and they sell their healthy products at various farmers' markets around the northstate. See bigbluffranch.com or email grassfed@bigbluffranch.com for more information.



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