

Prairie Conservation Forum
Presentation by Roy Audet

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Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen! I am pleased that Vern McNeely has asked me here today to explain what I do at the ranch, and why.

Let me make it clear that I am not here to make you money.

I don't think that I do much that is unique in the business of agriculture. Many operators have made similar decisions and done a better job of it.

Simply put, I have converted a mixed farming operation into beef production only. During the late 80s, my wife Christy and I discussed what we should do with our mixed farming operation that had a long term average of 23 bushels of spring wheat. We own or lease 1500 acres of crop land and 4000 acres of native pasture. I had seen the tilled land gradually deteriorating over the years. The land was rocky, light, and often blowing, washing or turning to alkali. My pencil and calculator told me that I needed to gross \$200 per seeded acre and keep the land base sustainable or I should get out of the grain business. I got out!

In 1990, I started on the project which looked simpler than it turned out to be. One thing seems to lead to another, and I feel that I am still in the process of getting things on the ranch the way they need to be. But that is what makes the business fun, challenging, and a reward when things go right.

Seeding and establishing grass or alfalfa is common in the County of Warner. What turned out the best for me, and I did try a variety of ways and seeds, is Crested Wheat. Five to six pounds per acre, seeded early and shallow in clean land, has produced my best stand. Because of the rocks and hills, I wanted stands of forage that didn't have to be retilled or reseeded for a long time.

I built a very heavy rock roller with seed box and harrows in front of the roller [Is the seed box in front of the roller too?] which is filled with used oil so that it is ready to go anytime. Rolling in early spring puts the rocks down and makes the sandy ground hard. This suppresses Down Brome which used to be my major weed but is pretty well gone now. In 1996, I seeded the last of the original farmland.

So over a period of several years, I have converted to a grass/hay beef operation. It has proven to be a better way to manage what little topsoil there is. Legumes and slough grasses are best for the low, alkali areas, but the steepest rocky slopes stay in place during high winds or rain if covered with Crested Wheat.

This spring, I have a very good stand of tame grass; unfortunately, the main herd had to come out early because my usually reliable water is gone. Some of the Crested Wheat is cut for hay. Cattle will eat this if it is cut early, before the plants head out. This also means that no seeds will be spread across the native pasture used for winter feeding.

I have fenced and cross fenced in a conventional manner that best suits the cows and the way they like to move. I try to rest and rotate the native grass. Nothing unusual there!

The tame grass is rolled so it is smooth ground for a haybine. When I cut grass for hay, I leave some standing, particularly rocky knolls or thin spots. I also leave snow-catching strips every 48 feet. When it is hayed again, I never leave the same spots uncut. This gives the grass time to go to seed and increase ground litter. It does seem to improve the stand.

An irrigation pivot uses water pumped from the river to grow alfalfa for supplemental feeding. About 150 cows and calves are carried on the ranch right now, and this can increase some after wet years.

The ranch buildings and corrals are in an old flood plain of the Milk River, just downstream of Writing On Stone Provincial Park, so I have always been careful not to offend a tourist or environmentalist. I have had the high banks at the building sloped and rocked, and have nearly a mile of river fenced from cattle. The river banks along this area show no erosion and have a good grass cover.

This was done a number of years ago and I had expected to get a growth of cottonwood or willow along the bank. We even tried to plant trees there and shoot the beaver, but it just didn't work. The last few years, I have tried fencing beaver and deer out of small areas and have had good luck getting cottonwood and willow to start on their own. With some experimenting, I have come up with a reasonable tree guard that is cow, beaver and deer proof. I now have plains cottonwood trees on the river flats that look like they could make the 100 years plus it takes to get a real mature cottonwood.

Because the corrals are right beside the river, I have sloped the river flat through the corrals and east one quarter mile so that any runoff from the yard that used to run into the river now drains into a large area of brush that is mostly Buffalo Berry.

Wintering and feeding cows more intensively also brought me more problems and answers. I process round bales on the ground for the cows. I found that a permanent feeding ground can turn out quite a mess that is mostly weeds. So what I do now is rotate feeding areas. I try to process my bales evenly on a large area of native grass. Then in early spring or chinooks, I use pasture harrows to spread the litter and manure. I try not to feed on that area again for two winters. The extra litter and nutrients have really improved the native grass.

One of the large areas of brush that is close to the buildings has been fenced and I call it my storm shelter. If a herd of cows is left access to brush and trees for the whole winter they will browse and scratch it to death. I keep the cows out until the weather is such that they actually need shelter. There is enough maneuvering room that I can process feed in the shelter. With the winters we have been having, the trees just keep getting better and the gates stay closed. A little side benefit to this shelter is that it is now thick enough that I keep a good population of overwintering pheasants.

I encourage deer hunting, with foot access only, in an effort to keep the high numbers under control. I search for people with tags, but try to have only one group on the land at a time. Even so, I needed to build a fence around the alfalfa hay stacks.

Three or four years ago, I phoned Greg Hale of Cows and Fish to ask him some questions about winter feeding on riparian areas. Mister Hale came down a couple of times and gave me advice and opinions about the feeding areas. Since that time, both the Counties of Warner and Forty Mile have become involved with Cows and Fish concerning the riparian areas of the Milk River.

An environmental assessment of the Milk River valley was done in the summer of 99, from Coffin Bridge down to and including the Ross Ranch. This assessment gives the ranchers an inventory or benchmark to verify any change whether due to grazing practices, wildlife or climate change. In the fall of 99, an off-stream water storage dugout was built on my place as a cost-share demonstration site. It includes a fully-fenced, ramped dugout. I had great hopes for this, as it sits in an undergrazed grass field. but there was no runoff in the spring of 2000 as you know.

This gives you kind of an overview of what I do to raise beef along the Milk River. In my situation, the native pasture was used more effectively by adding the crested wheat and alfalfa for spring and winter feeding. My major savings were in reduced machinery costs. These would not have been possible if I had kept even a little cropland. The ranch is a better place than it was, and I feel better about my role in managing it. But the job is far from over: I know that we never get it all done. There is never enough money or time.

Thanks,

Roy Audet

Comments from the Forum

Mr. Audet has given us a modest but important description of the changes to his operation. He recognized a problem, and set about in a logical manner to solve it. In his particular case, this solution meant reducing the high cost of producing a relatively low-value crop (wheat) while increasing his ability to produce a relatively high-value crop (beef). The result is a ranch which will thrive for many years.

His actions reflect a logical approach, using a variety of sources of information and financial support. He built on the strengths while reducing his operation's weaknesses. He worked with the environment rather than treating it as an enemy. He kept an open mind while maintaining a strong sense of purpose. Indeed, this approach could be used by many agricultural producers who find themselves in difficulties.

The initial actions were straightforward, but many details became visible as the full effect of the changes worked through. Attention to these details has enabled him to gain many small benefits which together add up to a viable operation. But most important for Roy, I think, is his knowledge that he has improved the land which he manages. His role as steward is clear, and has guided his decisions at every turn. I believe that this aspect has led to his recognition by the Alberta Cattle Commission. The Prairie Conservation Forum applauds this choice, and thanks Mr. Roy Audet for his inspirational example.