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RESTORATION FROM THE GROUND UP

Head of the River Ranch practices regenerative grazing to preserve the family's land at the headwaters of the South Concho River.

By Sarah Harris

Photos by Emily McCartney

When Anson Howard moved back to Texas in 2018 after practicing law as a judge advocate in the Marine Corps, he knew he wanted to do more than continue his law career — he also wanted to return to the family ranch near Christoval.

While the ranch had been leased for grazing for the last 20 years, Howard had long been inspired by Allan Savory's holistic management practices and was eager to make changes to the land that had been in his family since 1902.



Cutline

“It had always been a lifelong goal for me to come back and operate the ranch,” he says. “It was very obvious and frustrating that the conventional way wasn’t working, so I’d been chomping at the bit to start practicing regenerative grazing.”

By resuming family operation of the Head of the River Ranch and converting to a high-intensity, low-frequency grazing system currently allowing an average 260 days of rest, Howard and his family have made considerable strides to return the land to a healthy, vegetative state.

He is quick to mention the process has been a group effort. He credits mentors Emry Birdwell, Loy Sneary and Alejandro Carillo for their guidance. His wife, Meredith; along with his parents, Ryland and Pam; sisters, Isabel and Louisa; and ranch manager, Sam Reese, have also helped oversee the ranch’s progress.

FINDING SUITABLE CATTLE

To understand what the Howards have accomplished is to know where they have been.

“We are fortunate to be stewards of the headwaters of the South Concho River, which provides water to Christoval and San Angelo before joining the Concho River,” Howard says of the ranch that was first settled in the late 1870s.

Over the years, the 9,600-acre property was stocked with cattle, sheep and goats. Howard’s great-grandfather ran a Quarter Horse breeding operation.

As with many ranches at the time, stocking rates were maximized at the land’s expense. Howard’s grandfather took over management in 1948, and by the late 1970s, incorporated holistic grazing practices.

“Keeping the springs flowing is our No. 1 mission,” Howard says. “We want to promote tall bunch grasses, so rain trickles into and recharges the aquifer. This helps level out the river’s ebbs and flows for more continuous flow year-round.

“The grasses allow increased stock density, that with adequate rest, heal the land faster, and help provide better livestock gains.”

The Howards believe livestock are the best tools for managing the ranch and working with the natural ecosystem. Given the size of the operation, they first thought to run stocker cattle, but found a cow-calf operation aimed at continually improving genetics better suited to their goals.

“We needed an animal that could finish on grass, and we needed an animal that was also hardy and could withstand minimal inputs for the grass-fed market,” Howard says.

With these requirements in mind, Howard introduced commercial Red Angus females bred to bulls from Pharo Cattle Co. in eastern Colorado. They were chosen to be small-framed, easy-fleshing cattle.

As for inputs, the cattle receive salt, mineral and apple



cider vinegar. Howard says the lack of dewormers, pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals goes back into soil health, resulting in a tremendous rebound in microorganisms.

“We didn’t have dung beetles growing up, so I didn’t know what they were until I saw them on a ranch in South Texas,” he says. “Now we have herds of them rolling around and putting the manure and its nutrients into the soil. Seeing them and their impact has been one of the most rewarding things.”

NEW STRATEGIES

The Howards also know the consequences of not having any livestock on the land.

While enrolled in a USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS, program for riparian zones years ago, they watched the unstocked acres transition to grassland only to be overtaken by native brush.

“With the short periods of intense grazing, the cattle can’t be too selective, so they take a lot of the older forage,” Howard says of their current methods, which help restore the brushy areas to grass.

Water availability has been the ranch’s most limiting factor.

Faced with an outdated system intended for 50 head per pasture, not the 200 plus animal units the ranch has today, they had to make significant changes. Not wanting to keep up with numerous wells, windmills and pumps, Howard chose to build the water system around several strong solar and submersible wells, and use three-inch poly pipe to distribute water the length of the ranch.

To make best use of the rangeland, the family knew they needed to reconfigure fencing, too.

The ranch consisted of 11 pastures, ranging from 600 to 1,800 acres in size. In 2019, stocked with 100 animal units and having 100 days of rest, the land was still prone to overgrazing around waters and underutilization in the remainder of the pasture.

Seeing the land still wasn't recovering with an increase to 180 days of rest, Howard and Reese updated the fencing, running permanent single-strand high tensile electric trunk lines the length of the existing net-wired fencing pastures.

Using temporary single-strand polywire, the single herd is now grazed in paddocks as small as a quarter of an acre, which Reese designates weekly.

"The point of it was flexibility," Howard says. "On the two-thirds of the ranch where we have installed the regenerative grazing infrastructure, cattle are moved anywhere from 2-3 times a day to every other day.

"We show up at the gate and they are ready to go. You can move the whole herd in the amount of time it takes to move the polywire. It's very labor and family friendly, which means I can move cattle with everyone from my parents to my two-year-old."

WORTH THE INVESTMENT

Putting pencil to paper, Howard says the improvements cost about \$90 per affected acre. While he admits they were expensive, he says they were necessary.

"We weren't going to be able to lengthen our rest period without making better use of the land," he says. "Is \$90 an acre a lot? Yes, but it's less than buying an additional 9,600 acres to extend your rest and still not having the necessary infrastructure to achieve the desired density."

Howard says regenerative grazing helps pay for the improvements over time, by allowing for an increased stocking rate, and payments available from participating in NRCS programs help, too.

In addition, the family is optimistic they found a new way to help offset these costs. Last year they were approached by Grassroots Carbon, one of the first ecological services companies in Texas to pay ranchers for using practices that store carbon in the soil.

"It's time to get ranchers paid for what we've been doing for generations," Howard says. "We're still allowed to do prescribed burning, and we're required to practice regenerative grazing. The only thing we're not allowed to do is till the soil."

As part of the agreement, the family agrees to follow the six principles of soil health that will store the carbon for at least ten years, and Grassroots Carbon has five years to sell it.

The current rate is \$23 per metric ton of carbon stored. Grassroots keeps 20 percent, and there are additional measurement and monitoring fees, so Howard estimates the ranch will receive about \$12 per acre per year.

He points out while the measurements have been taken on their ranch, the soil cores have not been analyzed, nor payment issued. However, Howard says he is not worried, as the landowner is not out of pocket any costs. Even if soil carbon storage payments do not come to fruition, he knows that there will be other ecosystem services opportunities as a result of their management.



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**“KEEPING
THE SPRINGS
FLOWING IS OUR
NO. 1 MISSION.”**

— Anson Howard, Head of the River Ranch

The family’s eventual goal is having a drought management plan with the flexibility for 500 days of rest while grazing multiple livestock species. They recently introduced sheep to the ranch and will soon add goats.

Howard adds none of this would be possible without the conservation ethic started and instilled by his family, and solidified by Texas Brigades; as well as guidance from neighbors, NRCS professionals and countless others.

“What we are doing is restorative for nature, but it’s also restorative for the soul,” Howard says. “As humans, we inherently want to make things better, and we’re committed to preserving the ecological health of this property.” 🌱

Sarah Harris is a freelance writer who splits her time between Austin and her family’s ranch near Tilden.