



TSSRM/TSCRA 2008 Outstanding Rangeland Stewardship Award TAYLOR YEATES, LEERAY RANCH

The Leeray Ranch is 4460 acres, located in both Eastland and Stephens County Texas. Leeray was an oil boom community formed in the 1920's, located mostly on the north east side of the ranch. The majority of the towns' population lived in tents and small frame houses. The population grew to 5,000 people, which later moved 5 miles north to the Gunsight community when drilling began in that region. The ranch has had several owners since that time, which most of them leased the grazing and hunting rights. The ranch was severely overgrazed for many years, especially the areas along the riparian areas. In 2002, Kyle Yeates purchased the ranch and assigned Taylor Yeates (CPRM # 00183) as the ranch manager. Due to improper stocking rates, the ranch was in a poor range condition. Approximately 30% of the ranch was 90-100% bare ground and approximately 50% of the ranch was covered with invasive brush.

Bare ground was the ranch's main concern from the start, in an effort to rehabilitate the over utilized ranch they deferred the ranch for two complete growing seasons to let the ranch heal. The lack of desirable forage species and the profusion of invasive brush forced the Yeates family to make some drastic conservation minded modifications. Mr. Yeates has initiated some unconventional treatment methods of brush suppression with brilliant results. Equipped with a dozer, a Lawson Aerator and a

broadcast seeder Mr. Yeates began treating pastures with high densities of prickly pear, followed by a spring application of Grazon® P+D. This method of suppression on prickly pear has decreased the density to manageable levels and increased forage production in those pastures by over 200%.

He has successfully initiated a comprehensive mesquite brush management plan as well, with a combination of grubbing and the cut-stump method based on the ecological site. By utilizing the cut-stump method on ecological sites with shallow soils and placing the cut mesquites on the bare areas. This not only helps the brush problems, but by leaving the trees on the surface of the soil to decompose and return organic matter to the soil they keep the cattle from grazing the grasses that grow under them. He has rehabilitated over 70% of the previously denuded areas to vegetative cover by utilizing this method.

Taylor describes his approach in his own words “When we shear we cut two out of every three mesquites and cut all the cedars that we see. We left the rocky hills alone and focused our efforts on the more productive soils. Ideally we want to have a 35% brush cover. Aeration has improved our forage yields 2 times, and has turned bare hardpan into grassy areas”.

With respect to water quality and quantity, the ranch originally was well watered by 19 stock tanks and 5 ½ miles of East Sandy Creek. The Yeates family has increased grazing distribution across the ranch by building an additional 22 stock tanks to end up with 41 livestock water ponds on the ranch. They were very strategic with the placement of these new tanks. Many were built as silt tanks in alkali areas where the soil is commonly bare. Our philosophy is,” If it will not grow grass; then let’s make it hold water.”

With respect to grazing management, Mr. Yeates has been a “land steward” in every sense of the word. Mr. Yeates has implemented an eleven pasture one herd rotational grazing system on the ranch. Each pasture is grazed approximately 10-18 days twice per year. This systematic approach, allows him to split his forage intake by utilizing half of his allowable forage in the growing season and the other half during the dormant season, allowing each pasture approximately 10.5 to 11 months rest each year. Mr. Yeates utilizes the 25% harvest efficiency method to determine his stock density and stocking rates.

The Leeray ranch deals with and prepares for drought, first and foremost, by setting conservative stocking rates from the beginning. The ranch is currently stocked at 43 Acres/Animal Unit which is roughly 75% of the allowable rate for a 25% harvest efficiency of the available forage produced. The range condition is then monitored throughout the growing season and adjustments are made based on that year’s production. By stocking at a conservative rate, Taylor can utilize that remaining 25% with yearlings in above normal rainfall years. However, Taylor has yet to take that option because of his conservative nature and the fact that the ranch, he feels, is still in the healing stage.

Due to these conservative stocking rates and sound grazing management decisions, the Leeray Ranch is seeing higher successional plants like switchgrass, indiangrass and eastern gammagrass establish in pastures previously dominated by King Ranch bluestem, silver bluestem, and perennial threeawn.

The ranch additionally, has an abundance of wildlife including: whitetail deer, dove, duck, bobwhite quail, hogs, bobcats, coyote, and turkey. The Leeray Ranch has provided enough forage with proper stocking rates, shelter by using brush sculpting techniques, and water to ensure healthy wildlife populations. In 2003, they constructed three miles of brush patterns across the ranch to aid in wildlife movement and travel. In 2003, the ranch enrolled in the Texas Managed Land Deer Program (TMLDP). This program provides yearly deer data and harvest recommendations to insure a healthy deer population is maintained. Through proper culling, the ranch has seen average deer weights increase and average buck BC scores increase. The ranch does not lease hunting rights, or sell wildlife hunts; they in turn use this opportunity to teach local children about the importance of wildlife management, wildlife conservation, and hunter education. The Yeates family allows local deserving children to come out on supervised hunts to harvest the deer.

It is an honor to recognize the Leeray Ranch with the 2008 TSSRM-TSCRA Outstanding Rangeland Stewardship award.