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## Sustainable grazing systems benefit environment and producer pocketbooks

By Mark Parker

For Terry Gompert, partnering with nature to provide livestock grazing solutions means good stewardship and social responsibility as well as optimizing profitability.

Speaking to more than 130 people gathered for the annual Kansas Graziers' Association Winter Conference in Assaria, on January 17, the Holistic Management International certified instructor encouraged producers to adhere to grazing basics while exploring creative practices which lead to sustainable economic, environmental and social benefits.

For Gompert, who is also a University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension educator, it begins with the cowherd. The functional cow, he said, proves herself within a given herd and environment.

"You won't know the functional cow in your herd until she's had 10 calves," Gompert asserted. "She's the one who's survived your place and your management. She's not necessarily pretty but she'll have a timely calf every year with no extra special care."

Once that cow has been identified, Gompert suggested, producers should retain her offspring, both male and female. Another important characteristic of a functional cow, he said, is that she is "forage friendly" rather than having been selected for performance on a concentrate-based diet.

"Operators who make the most profit use the least processed feed," Gompert said. "It is a must to let the cow harvest as much (of her diet) as possible."

Other characteristics of the functional cow, according to Gompert, is that she is easy fleshing, low stress, low to moderate in milk production, feminine in her conformation and has coloring which is appropriate for her environment.

Noting that he believes the cows in many herds have gotten too large, Gompert acknowledged that, "just because a cow is small doesn't mean she's good, either."

High volume milk producers, however, are clearly not a good idea, he stressed.

"Milk is antagonistic to profit because the high-producing cow is harder to maintain," he said. "You want the calf to grow



Holistic International Certified Educator and UNL Extension Educator Terry Gompert, right, talks with producers at the recent Kansas Graziers' Association Winter Conference in Assaria

from forages, not from a high volume of milk. Cows that give less milk, but milk that is high in fat, are much better but we have not done a good job of identifying those cows."

To provide an economical diet for the cow herd, Gompert strongly advised that graziers strive to extend the grazing season. Grazing cool and warm season forages at the proper time and using a little creativity to fill in the gaps, he said, can keep harvested forages to a minimum

"There are all kinds of alternatives," said Gompert, who is also a cattleman. "The opportunities are amazing."

Suggesting that beef producers utilize what they have and manage for what they want, he noted that some of his favorite alternatives include strip grazing corn; spring-

planted turnips and oats, and skip-row corn with fall turnips as well as summer and winter annuals. In his own operation, Gompert has also grazed other brassicaceous plants such as radishes, kale, rape and rutabaga.

In order to make the most of any forage, Gompert is an advocate of multi-paddock, intensively managed grazing. One of the most common problems he sees with such systems, however, is that developing more paddocks often leads to developing more individual herds.

"We end up using them for convenience sake and the result is that some part of our land is being over-grazed all the time," he said. "Combine your herds. High density, high impact grazing gives the forage more rest and a lot of healing (of abused land) can take place."

Relying on high stock density for short grazing periods, Gompert emphasized, better utilizes existing forages as well as providing more time for pastures to recover and attain a higher level of productivity. He cited several cases in which extremely high stock density was employed to graze out unwanted forages, such as musk thistle, with the eventual result being a more desirable mix of forage plants.

To facilitate intensive grazing systems, Gompert said that farmers and ranchers themselves have developed "ingenious ways" to make cattle and fence moving easier. Tools such as gates on timers, portable water tanks, mini-trucks rigged to drive under fences, four-wheelers adapted for carrying posts and spooling wire and other techniques can enable producers to better utilize their grazing resources, he suggested.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension educator touched on a myriad of practices he's seen that have helped livestock producers make money. In addition to endorsing Bud Williams marketing schools, his list of money-makers included keyline soil building by using a Yeoman plow; "Bud Box" working pen design; the use of a lead steer to aid in cattle moving; windrow grazing under hot wires; nose rings for weaning calves; controlled bale "grazing" as an alternative to hauling hay bales off of fields; and networking with other producers to gain ideas.

Looking to the future, Gompert said that the current turbulent economic times will create many opportunities. "Be ready," he urged cattlemen.

Gompert believes low-cost producers and grass-based agriculture will be among the big winners and that society in general will benefit through increased soil quality, better quality food and an improved environment.

In striving to achieve these goals, the educator told the Kansas graziers that everything they do has an impact on the land and on their quality of life. He suggested that

Continued on page 16

## Wheat expert suggests yield-boosting strategies during No-Till on the Plains

By Bill Speigel

Agronomist Phil Needham has made a living helping wheat farmers in the United States achieve yields approaching the European average of 100 bushels per acre, or more. A native of England, Needham has developed a consulting business in Kentucky. He spoke about many of these high-yield strategies at the No-Till on the Plains Winter Conference in Salina Jan. 27-28.

Not all farmers are ready to incorporate Needham's strategies on their farms. But Needham says Kansas farmers could boost yields by 10 or 20 bushels per acre by addressing a few often overlooked details.

"It's all about minimizing or eliminating weak links. When a farmer says he is doing everything correctly, I often can find uniformity problems, find weeds, insects, diseases, and many other yield-limiting problems. I can stand there and say if you eliminate that



In a matter of months producers will return to the fields to harvest another crop. Paying attention to little details makes a big difference in yields according to consultant Phil Needham. (Photo ©Andy Stanton)

problem you get a few bushels here and there," Needham explains. "Based upon my trials, I could come up with some pretty good numbers that relate to a lot of bushels. In a lot of examples, I can assemble 10-20 bushels they've left on the table."

Obtaining uniform emergence, he says, is a good start.

"Uniformity is something simple, which frequently doesn't cost any money to address. For example, if any producer wants to no-till wheat into crop residue, they've got to spread their previous crop residue evenly. A lot of people fall short in that they cannot spread residue, and thus have stand and emergence problems," Needham explains.

Achieving optimum planting populations, he adds, is another aspect of uniform crop emergence.

"When I talk to producers in Kansas and ask what seed rate they use, they say 60, 80, 90 pounds per acre. They may have reasons to select that seed rate. I'll ask, them, 'do you adjust by planting date, variety or seed size?' The answer is, 'probably not.'"

"Depending on year and variety, the number of seeds per pound can range from 12-20,000. If you plant two varieties, one 12K and one 15K, if you plant 90 pounds, you have 20-30% difference in the number of seeds per pound. I work with a number of producers as an agronomist and one of the first things we do is set our seeding rate of pounds per yard or acre, depending on the variety we're seeding, seeding date, whether or not it is no-till or wheat after wheat or wheat after soybeans. Seeding the right number of seeds is a good

start," he explains. "Some people fall over at the starting gate with that."

Needham says farmers should obtain soil tests and pay attention to where deficiencies may occur.

"Some guys are doing a better job than others," he acknowledges. "Generally speaking, there are some opportunities with fertility. Maybe a field is deficient in micronutrients such as zinc for example, or major nutrients, such as phosphorous. Getting phosphorous placed in the row, for example, is a good strategy."

Once the crop is in the ground and established, farmers need to consider nitrogen fertilizer strategies. Should farmers apply all the nitrogen at once, or split-apply and have two applications?

Finally, management of the growing crop is key.

"We need to manage weeds and knock them out early so they don't compete with the crop. And we need to keep foliar diseases

out. There are some guys that lost 20-30 bushels because they didn't use fungicide, or didn't apply at the right stage of development or use the right nozzles," he says.