

Producer Success Story - Chase Groves



Chase Groves is transitioning to rotational grazing and enjoys talking about the challenges he's faced, the lessons he's learned, the successes he's had, and his plans for the future. He calls himself "passionate" about advocating for farming. Chase lives with his wife Krystal, their 4-year old daughter Gentry, and 1-year old son Cash on his family's ranch near Lewisville, Arkansas surrounded on three sides by the Red River. Chase and his family live in a restored farm house that was on the property when his grandfather traded for the land in 1969. His father and mother live within sight and work the 1000-acre ranch. Chase currently works leased land associated with a historical plantation-era estate about 8 miles up the road with 240 acres in full rotation and 160 acres in transition. Last year, the Chase Groves Family was the Miller County and District 8 Farm Family of the year and are currently competing for the Farm Bureau Farm Family of the Year for 2018.

Chase manages several different ventures. He has row crops, 100 acres of hay, 1200 pecan trees he works with his dad, a registered cow herd, a commercial cow herd, a calf weaning program, a chicken litter fertilizer application business, and a custom grazing program. He also has an interest in New Day Genetics. He says with a laugh, "I'll try some outlandish things. I think the biggest downfall of a lot of producers is they just don't want to try things." Chase was first introduced to the advantages of rotational grazing when he was traveling the region from 2007 through 2010 working for the American Semmental Association. He spent a lot of time in Missouri and says, "Everybody does it up there." And when he visited other ranches to apply chicken litter fertilizer, he noticed "the more gates to open, the more grass; the less gates, the less grass." It would be hard to summarize rotational grazing any better than that.

When Chase first started investigating rotational he admits he was a little intimidated watching the videos and reading the instructional material. With his particular situation, he had to be efficient and maximize gross income on a per-acre basis to make it work. He has some very specific advice to anyone interested in starting rotational grazing: be patient, don't rush it, and understand that every year is different. He says, in his opinion, you must realize that instead of doing it "by the book" and getting frustrated, you need to develop "the grazer's eye; spend time with your cattle, watch them and learn from them. The cows will tell you when they're ready to move." He says he's noticed that cows raised on rotational grazing will try to trick you though. "They'll start calling to you a little early." He leaves his pure-bred cows in the paddocks an additional day after they start calling. He says the experts will tell you there are no studies proving it, but his experience tells him cows in rotational grazing are not as selective as cows raised in open pasture. He's also noticed they can acquire a taste for a varied diet. When he first introduced peas in a fall cover crop mix, it took his steers about seven days to get acclimated. But after that, the peas were grazed down. Chase has a current stocking rate of 2 acres per head but is working toward a goal of 1.5 acres per head.



With his rotational grazing plan, Chase keeps most of his paddocks at between 13 and 17 acres. He only returns to his “first” paddock after at least an average of 30 to 40 days. He will also skip some pastures, depending on how the forage has rebounded after grazing. Chase says he does something different every year. He says that if you get into a pattern, you can set up situations favorable for specific forage species and lose desirable diversity. He has water structures in every pasture. But he has not been able to utilize strip grazing in the summer because he doesn’t have enough shade. So he’s now working toward installing 80% UV protection shade devices in all his pastures. He’s used 70% UV protection in the past, but he doesn’t think that’s enough. He’s also noticed advantages to certain types of cows. He thinks “hair” is important. His cows that shed and his “slick-haired” cows perform better. He’s starting to pay closer attention to hair types and use that as a method for determining which individuals to cull from his herd.



Chase believes that paying attention to what is going on with your grass helps you make all the right decisions. He says he's changed from being a "cow man" to being a "grass man." Chase states without hesitation that soil health is the answer to a profitable operation and he makes very specific management decisions with soil health in mind. For one thing, he's stopped using long-range wormer. It's very persistent in the environment and he believes it transfers from the manure into the soil and kills the beneficial soil organisms that are necessary for healthy plant production. The microbes, worms, and beetles keep the soil loose and keep nutrients available for the plants. He uses as much chicken litter as he can find, and only uses synthetic fertilizer when absolutely necessary. He makes his own seed mix for fall planting, including clovers, vetch and peas and he's invested in his own seed drill. Owning his own drill gives him greater planting flexibility. He grows a lot more winter forage than he actually needs, letting it return back into the soil. He doesn't use herbicide, instead, he utilizes spring strip grazing to "hoof down" or pulverize the cover into the soil.

Chase is working toward year-round grazing and his next big challenge is overcoming our hot, dry Arkansas summers. Right now, he's right at 300 days of grazing per year. He's got some Bermudagrass, but it doesn't give him the tonnage he needs. He really wants to establish more Dallisgrass because it stays upright and holds value longer than Bermuda. His plan is to better utilize summer annuals to get to his desired production and diversity.

Chase's experiences as a transitioning rotational grazer can cover a lot more ground, so to speak. You can hear more of his experience-based observations in his AGLC-sponsored presentations around the state as a member of our speaker's bureau. He was most recently featured as a speaker at the Arkansas Cattlemen's Convention and Trade Show's 2018 Cattlemen's College.