

GRSB Member Profile:

Ross Macdonald
98 Ranch Inc.

GRSB sat down with Ross Macdonald, president of 98 Ranch Inc., to talk about sustainability and best practices on his operation.

Q: How long have you been in the cattle business?

A: I've been in the cattle business about 15 years. I'm the president of 98 Ranch Inc., and my wife is vice president. We are the only two shareholders, so we are owner-operators.

Q: Walk me through your experience.

A: I grew up about 40 minutes away from where we are now. And before I moved back, I went to the University of Saskatchewan for a few years and obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture and a Master of Science degree in animal and range sciences. The master's program focused on cattle behavior and rangeland use. I headed down the path to do my master's project at Montana State University (which happened to be in 1998, and that's the reason why our company bears its name). That was really the first major step in the direction that I wanted to go in my career. I wanted to be directly involved in livestock production, cattle in particular, and the core of that production would be part of a grass-based ranch design. Now...I didn't know at the time that I would end up back here and own my own operation, but through a series of opportunities presented themselves. We moved back and purchased one ranch and then a couple of years later, we had the opportunity to purchase another ranch, and it sort of evolved since. We started as a seasonal stocker cattle operation and moved to a combination of stocker cattle and cow calf. We've come a long way. If you had asked me 17 years ago if I thought we'd be operating how we are, I wouldn't have seen it.

Q: What best practices do you implement on your ranch to ensure sustainability?

A: The key part that I've discovered is that the more I practice these concepts myself, and the longer my tenure with advising other people on these concepts, the more I realize that sustainable practices are constantly changing and that there is always room for improvement. So a lot of it isn't an absolute, but I guess when I look back over the past 15 years on my own operation, a lot of the practices that we've implemented started with a core appreciation and understanding for healthy, functioning, abundantly productive rangeland... that's really the core of it. There are a lot of best practices around maintaining that core function of the grassland ecosystem that we operate on. Around that, we've implemented some animal type management. We try to select an animal that is suited to the environment and the productivity of the area. We've also implemented rotation of those animals in various forms - some of it in the form of herding and animal handling, to reduce areas that get more heavily impacted, and move the cattle into areas that are less heavily impacted. And we've also done some cross-fencing to enhance that as well. I've discovered that some of these best practices get better if you give them more time to demonstrate their value. So, we didn't rush this. It started pretty basic, like considering timing of grazing, identifying areas that are more conducive to grazing in certain times of year, etc. In addition, we've been adapting over time with animal handling and infrastructure whether it's water development or restricted water access to management of riparian areas to ensure long-term ecological function.

Q: Are you incorporating polyculture into your best practices or division of pasture into paddocks?

A: *It's evolving as we go. The majority of our land base is made of native rangeland. There is a wide diversity of species that exist. By implementing grazing management practices, we strive to maintain the health of that natural plant diversity.*

Q: What about water management best practices?

A: *In the wetland areas or areas where there is flowing water, we move cattle to give those areas time to recover from previous grazing. The key is to give it time to regenerate and maintain its healthy and natural state.*

Q: If there was one thing you'd want general consumers to know about cattle ranching, what would it be?

A: *At its very core, cattle ranching is based on fundamental and environmentally sustainable functions in terms of the soil and its ability to grow plant life. Soil and vegetation will regenerate year after year and will continue in the long term if we manage our activities with that in mind. We have ruminant animals that can use that vegetation and turn it into valuable products – that's the beauty of cattle ranching. All ranches have subtle and distinct differences, but without grass there isn't ranching. The ability to maintain that system and use it for local and global resources is the very heart of sustainable activity.*

Q: Why did you join GRSB?

A: *I looked at the GRSB membership and compared it to the mission and vision of GRSB. I was fascinated by the fact that I could relate to the mission and vision as a small producer in the northern Great Plains. I could relate to the discussions that were happening at the table – and those discussions were being led by major corporations. If those corporations were coming together beyond corporate interest, if nothing else by becoming involved and following activity of GRSB, I would gain a global understanding of the industry in which our whole life is invested in. That's what attracted me to it as I looked at the website...the structure and notion of the roundtable with different potential members and opportunities to have a voice at the table with organizations which were larger in scale and had different perspectives. Even if I make no impact, I'll still gain a huge amount of knowledge of what the larger picture is there.*

Q: How are you involved in GRSB?

A: *I'm a member of the producer constituency. As a member, I have the opportunity to listen in on the board of directors' conference calls, volunteer and participate in the different working groups. I listen in on several of the conference calls, and I'm extremely impressed by how the board is stewarded by the executive leadership. It only took a couple of calls to be hooked on the items discussed but also the leaders having an ability to maintain the intent of GRSB at the table while facilitating a general discussion. After conference calls, there are opportunities for members to comment. I thought I could add value and started to voice my opinion. Some of board members were very grateful that I would take the time to be involved. It was an encouraging experience.*

Q: What value do you feel GRSB brings to its members?

A: *I think the core value it brings to its members is the opportunity to come together in an environment designed and stewarded to be an open discussion without market related bias or market related discussion. In addition, the opportunity to network with individuals and discuss your local situations as well as learn about the global perceptions and demand and supplies of various aspects of beef production (whether that is rainforest deforestation, grassland/rangeland management, or social issues related to meat processing across the globe). All of those issues are discussed and valued and provide information and insight – and that's a huge value to each and every member to gain a broader understanding of this production chain that we play a small role in. The roundtable*

provides the opportunity to have the bigger picture discussion dialogue with local input. To quote a GRSB phrase – it's continuous improvement to each of those sectors along the way.

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