

Herding experiments could aid pastures, predators



Matt Barnes herds cattle as part of a herding experiment near Helena Monday morning.
Laura Lundquist/Chronicle

Laura Lundquist, Chronicle Staff Writer

HELENA – Even though Monday still felt like mid-August, it was time to move the cattle down from the high meadows of the Sieben Livestock Ranch.

As the sun climbed high Monday morning, five riders met in a grassy expanse of the mountains outside Helena and eyed a few small groups of cows grazing among the higher pines.

The majority of Witt Hibbard's 400 yearling heifers were still milling in a lower area near the stock tanks where the riders had left them the night before.

“The one success we've had is that they're staying together,” said rider Matt Barnes of Keystone Conservation. “Saturday was the first time they did that.”

Barnes and two other riders, Eric Sauerhagen and Garl Germann, have herded Hibbard's heifers every day since Labor Day, attempting to use low-stress management techniques to move the cattle between specific areas of the ranch.

“Bud Williams developed low-stress herding, and Witt is a protégé of Bud's. So we've gotten to learn a little from him,” Barnes said. “One week isn't enough to really get anything going. But this was the first successful use of the rodear.”

Using rodearing — a herding technique that uses horseback riders and dogs to keep cattle moving together — the trio moved the herd between different grazing areas and the water tank area throughout each day.

Barnes is taking a scientific approach, counting the cows that stray each morning and using GPS locators to outline the areas where they move the herd.

It's all part of a Keystone Conservation effort to formally demonstrate the benefits of some newer range management tools. KC executive director Lisa Upson said some of that information could be used to justify a grant request for a herding or range rider project from the Montana Livestock Loss Board.

“George (Edwards) said the Livestock Loss Board is interested in integrated (predator) conflict prevention plans. Our approach is that you have to supplement... with some level of proactive livestock management to prevent conflicts with predators,” Upson said.

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Training cattle to stay together gives them safety in numbers, which can thwart bears, and makes them less likely to run, which is when wolves go into action. “The less spread out they are, the less predation we see,” Barnes said. “Plus it benefits your pasture.”

When cattle are shifted regularly, each grazing area of around 4 to 5 acres is heavily trodden and grazed for just a short period of time. Once the cattle move, the area can recover from the disturbance and is often healthier.

Keeping the cattle moving is especially important at watering time. If allowed to loiter near streams, cattle can trample banks, severely damaging riparian areas.

Like many ranchers, Hibbard already cares for the range by rotating his cattle between pastures. But the rotation period is longer, and he has to use solar-powered electrical wire to keep the animals in each plot.

Rodearing requires man and horse power. To make it more appealing for ranchers, Barnes and his partners want to see if they can train the cattle to move easily so one rider could do it alone.

They also want to perfect the low-stress herding technique so cattle stay in one place overnight without the expense and effort of having to lay out polywire enclosures.

It all comes down to “placing” the cattle.

Sauerhagen used the analogy of the sport of curling: The herd is the curling stone and the riders are the players with the brooms.

The riders have to give the herd enough momentum to move it to the desired location but back off early enough that the herd stops without the riders having to get in front. That way, the herd is more likely to settle.

“They're usually placed when they have their heads down and are facing different directions,” Sauerhagen said. “For a stockman, the holy grail is being able to consistently place the herd. Witt's able to do it about 50 percent of the time.”

Except for a few splinter groups, the riders were successful placing the herd after five days of practice. But that's where the practice ends because Hibbard has to move his cows down for the winter.

Barnes and Germann didn't meet Hibbard and work out an arrangement until late August. So they didn't have much of a season left.

Germann said he's hoping the collaboration can continue next summer.

Meanwhile, the riders rode easily behind their charges Monday as the cows plodded cooperatively down to the barn.

“We weren't able to do this a week ago,” Sauerhagen said. “We've done it enough that they know what to do.”