

Cammack Ranch Family Says Fencing Plays a Role in Range Management

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better together



Thanks to rotational grazing and other conservation efforts, wildlife are abundant on the Cammack Ranch in northwest South Dakota.

Around dusk, if you drive a 4-wheeler out to check cattle on the Cammack Ranch in northwest South Dakota, you're bound to see herds of antelope, deer, flocks of wild turkey and even some bald eagles.

"It didn't used to be this way," says Gary Cammack, who together with his wife, Amy, purchased the land in Union Center, in 1984. At that time he says they were lucky if they saw a single deer. The reason? The range was in tough shape. Due to season-long overgrazing, there was little plant diversity and quite a few erosion issues.

"We knew if we didn't reverse the trend, we wouldn't be in business," Gary says, explaining, "soil health, plant diversity along with the diversity, quantity and vitality of wildlife are a definite barometer of the potential profitability of a ranch."

So, the couple set right to work restoring the health of their rangeland. Putting up fence was one of the first things they did.

"Fencing is what allows us to implement our grazing plan effectively," explains Reed Cammack, 38, who joined the family ranching operation fulltime in 2017.

Installing cross fence, utilizing Bekaert Cattleman® Pro 14-gauge barbed wire, allowed them to divide 1,000-plus-acre parcels of rangeland into smaller sections so they could implement rotational grazing.

They began planting trees, putting up fence to protect the young shelter belts from cow/calf pairs. They dug in miles of rural water pipelines and installed water tanks throughout pastures making it feasible to install more cross fence, encouraging cattle to utilize every square inch of pasture and protecting riparian areas from too much hoof traffic.

Thirty-five years later, they are still putting up fence, planting trees and installing water tanks. To date, the Cammack's have planted more than 30,000 trees and installed nearly 40 miles of rural water pipeline. In 2018, the Cammack family was recognized for their efforts with the Leopold Conservation Award.

Keeping birds and other wildlife in mind, the bottom strand of the barbed wire fence is smooth. And they only use high-tensile wire.

"With high-tensile fencing, once it's in, the maintenance is very minimal. The high-tensile fence is durable and holds up well to heavy snow load and ice which we can get in an extreme South Dakota winter,"

Reed says.

Tensile strength is the term used to describe resistance of steel or other materials to break under pressure. Compared to the low-carbon barbed wire Gary, Amy, Reed and his brothers, Scott, Ryan and Chris initially installed, the high-tensile barbed wire can withstand 25 to 35 percent more pressure before breaking.

Because it only has 3 percent elongation, compared to low-carbon wire's 13 percent elongation, high-tensile barbed wire doesn't sag from snow load or livestock pressure.

The Cammacks began putting in high-tensile barbed wire when they were introduced to Bekaert fencing products through their other family business, Cammack Ranch Supply.

Located on Highway 34 next door to Gary and Amy's ranch house, Cammack Ranch Supply serves livestock producers throughout western North and South Dakota, northwestern Nebraska and eastern Wyoming and Montana. Together with their sons, Gary and Amy built the Cammack Ranch Supply business as they grew their ranching operation.

“Through Cammack Ranch Supply we are always looking for new and innovative products to reduce costs and create efficiencies on our own ranch, as well as to help other ranchers increase efficiencies on their operations and make better use of their land,” Gary explains.

After recognizing the benefits of high-tensile fencing products themselves, the Cammacks encourage other livestock producers to use them as well, because once the fence is installed, there is little to no maintenance, and high-tensile wire ends up costing less per roll.

When they need to fix low-carbon fencing, they found a quicker, more efficient way to accomplish the unpopular task—the Gripple joiner and tension system (image A). Producers can also purchase rolls of high tensile wire from Bekaert, factory-fit with Gripple joiners (image B).

“We still have fence with considerable years of experience, and the Gripple joiners eliminate the need to make an old-fashioned splice in the old wire fence,” Gary explains. “When installing new fence, the joiners allow you to get the tension perfect—you’re not under tightening or over tightening. It takes the guess work and labor out of it.”



By implementing rotational grazing practices, the Cammack family was able to improve soil health and restore native rangelands, increasing plant diversity and forage availability, and ultimately increasing the stocking rate by 80 percent.

Rotational grazing increases forage availability ... even in drought years

Never losing sight of their original vision—to improve soil health and rangeland quality for cattle and wildlife—the Cammacks intentionally manage their high-intensity rotational grazing system. Each spring they rotate which pasture is grazed first, closely monitoring the range plants to determine when it’s time to move cattle into the next pasture.

“One section of range is divided into 13 pastures. This means once we’ve started the spring grazing in one pasture, it’s another 13 years before we start our grazing in that pasture again,” Gary says.

Reed adds, “Typically, the pastures are on a seven-to-10-day rotation, but we are mindful of grazing pressure, especially early in the spring. All plants have growing points at the leaf joints,” he explains. “When we move the cattle out of a pasture, we want to have one or two leaves left on the plant or about half the biomass left in the field as cover.”

In Spring 2019, to take advantage of an abundance of sweet clover due to excess moisture, Reed sped up the spring rotation, moving cattle through each pasture every two days. “This way they were able to graze the sweet clover while it was still palatable.

Then, we began the standard seven-to-10-day rotation.”

Their rangeland responded to the seasonal grazing rotation by increasing production of more desirable warm and cool season grasses, which in turn have crowded out noxious weeds.

“Rotational grazing is like turning a kid loose in an all-you-can-eat buffet. They will always eat the dessert first. Cows are no different; they will eat the most lush, best tasting plants first, but with this system, you can also get them to eat the less palatable plants. And over time, populations of their favorite plants increase,” Reed explains.

And rotational grazing increases forage availability even in the worst of drought years.

“During the 2016 drought, we were only able to graze each pasture for a week, but because there were 13 pastures, and all the pastures had rural water piped to them, it extended our grazing season,” Amy explained.

Rotational grazing increased their overall stocking rate by 80 percent while at the same time bolstering wildlife populations.

“We are stewards of the land. It’s our job to take care of the plants and animals that have come under our responsibility,” Gary says.

To learn more about the Cammack’s conservation efforts, visit <https://sandcountyfoundation.org/our-work>.

To learn more about Bekaert’s high-tensile fencing and Gripple products, visit <https://fencing.bekaert.com>.



The Cammack ranch family says high-tensile fencing is an essential tool to effective rangeland management through rotational grazing. In 2018 the family was recognized for their conservation efforts on their northwest South Dakota ranch with the Leopold Conservation Award. Pictured here (left to right): Amy & Gary Cammack with grandson, Miles; Amber and Reed Cammack with sons, Ian and Elliott.