

# Land Management is Top of Mind for Texas Rancher Named Conservationist of the Year

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better together

Ranching runs deep in Don Casey's veins. "It is either in your blood or it's not. For me, it's just in my blood to be a rancher," explains the fifth-generation Blanco County, Texas cattleman.

It's safe to say conservation is part of his DNA as well. Named 2019 Texas Conservation Rancher of the Year by the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, at 76 Casey says he comes from a long line of conservationists, recalling how his Grandpa Victor taught him to identify plants on the open range when they were riding out to check cattle or fixing fence together.

Today, he uses this skill to manage the rangeland, letting the condition, height and species of grass tell him when it's time to rotate his cattle out of one pasture or rest a pasture for an extended period of time.

Leaving enough of the plant behind is essential to not only species survival and weed control but also overall rangeland health. Over the last century, the Hill Country Casey loves lost much of its topsoil to erosion, leaving a fragile ecosystem in need of care. Through his efforts, Casey is encouraging plentiful and diverse plant species to feed and anchor the soil.

With more than 1,000 acres to manage, Casey spends much of his time meticulously monitoring grassland conditions. "We raise cattle, but you can't raise cattle without grass. So, really, I am a grass manager," explains Casey, of the belief that drives his management decisions.

Ranching in the drought-prone Hill Country of Texas often tests his determination to put grass management first. But he always does. Sometimes culling his herd if need be to reduce grazing pressure. Fortunately, the land responds to Casey's care. "We have been in a drought recently, and many ranchers had to sell off, but I'm not hurting at all. We are going into winter with enough grass to make it for a while."

His long-term conservation goal is to restore the land back to pre-settlement ecological conditions, providing quality wildlife habitat. "I wish I could go back and see what the land was like when my ancestors first arrived in the early 1840s."

An engineer in Austin for 25 years prior to taking over the ranch fulltime, Casey thrives on improving conditions and developing management practices that work. Practices like cross fencing to reduce pasture size so he can more intensely manage grazing. To do this, Casey's added miles of boundary and cross fencing.

Fencing plays a key role in Casey's rotational grazing operation. "Fencing is what keeps the cattle where they need to be for the length of time I need them to be there," Casey explains.

In addition to new fence, over the years, he's had to replace World War I-era fence his great-grandfather put up a century ago. "After the War, great-grandpa got a bargain on surplus concertina barbed wire." Today, he builds fencing using high-tensile Bekaert Cattleman® Pro 14-gauge barbed wire. "In addition to tensile strength, they reverse the twist of the wire at every barb. One time its twisted to the right and the next time its twisted to the left. What they have effectively done is, they have made a quarter-mile long



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Texas rancher, Don Casey only uses high-tensile wire with a protective coating. Forty years ago he tested low-carbon, noncoated wire and Bekaert's high-tensile barbed wire on a fence along Blanco County Road 302. The results speak for themselves.

He hasn't needed to repair any of the high-tensile barbed wire with a class 3 coating. Whereas, the low-carbon strands have broken and are quite rusty.

spring. This is why when cows, deer, elk feral hogs or snow apply pressure, it will stretch and snap back."

Tensile strength is the term used to describe the resistance of steel or other materials to break under pressure. Compared to low-carbon barbed wire, high-tensile barbed wire can withstand 25 to 35 percent more pressure before breaking. Because high-tensile wire 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 when a bull elk pushes up against it.

"Being an engineer, I'm a bit of an experimenter. Little more than 35 years ago, I put up a fence along County Road 302 and half was Bekaert, high-tensile barbed wire with a class 3 coating. The other half was low carbon barbed wire without a coating. To this day, none of those five strands of high-tensile wire have broken. None of them are rusty. The other strands have broken and it's rusty."

Across the landscape of Casey's ranch, ecosystems' needs vary – and so do his rotational grazing and fencing techniques. Casey uses barbed wire to limit cattle access along two bodies of water which meander through sections of his ranch, Cypress Creek and the Pedernales River. In riparian areas he moves cattle through more quickly, leaving behind at least a foot of plants standing to increase sediment filtration and erosion protection.

On the open range, pasture-size increases to 150 to 400 acres, but in areas of restored pastureland, where Casey and his dad introduced Kleingrass on land that had previously been cultivated

crop ground, pasture-size is reduced to 10- to 30-acre parcels. In these areas of intense grazing, Casey uses a few strands of electric, high-tensile smooth wire to keep his cattle in place.

"Kleingrass can handle pretty intensive grazing, if you manage it and let it go to seed once a season. What it does is take the pressure off the native grasses and let them go to seed," he says.

Keeping wildlife in mind, in high-traffic areas, he raises the height of the bottom wire in some sections of fence so fawns can crawl under, he spaces his wires 10-inches apart so deer won't get their hooves caught and in areas of cross fencing, he engineers small openings in the fence line – large enough for deer to pass through, but too small for cattle. "Deer hunting is a significant part of our ranch income. We actually make more net income off deer hunting than off of cattle," explains Casey, who offers three exclusive trophy hunts each year. But he emphasizes, creating wildlife habitat is more than a business decision, it's part of his ranching philosophy.

"To me, wildlife is more than deer. It's all God's critters. I'm also a bird watcher, and I was curious to see how many different species call our ranch home. To date, I've seen 188 different species of birds."

Casey thinks of conservation practices that benefit his family's land, making it productive for the cattle and wildlife as part of his ranching legacy. "My daughter, Cat, loves ranching, so this place is covered, and will be cared for by our family for a sixth generation."



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