



Jon Taggart wondered why certain grasses came up in some pastures but not in others. Suspecting that soil health was the difference led to spending a lot of time looking down at the pastures at Burgundy Pasture Beef. From left are Jeff Geider director of the Institute of Ranch Management at TCU; Jon Taggart; and his son, Ben Taggart.

Burgundy Fields

Jon Taggart's questions could mean answers for all

By Katrina Huffstutler

Editor's note: This piece is the second in a series of six on the Texas Christian University Institute of Ranch Management Living Laboratory. In this month's installment, we introduce you to Jon Taggart, whose Burgundy Pasture Beef operation serves as the research site. Over the next few months, we will dive deeper into what they are doing and learning along the way.

Jon Taggart did not set out to run a grass-finished beef operation. He never dreamed of selling directly to consumers online or in his three brick-and-mortar stores. He did, however, always want to be a cattleman. And since you have to play the hand you are dealt, his path looks a little different than that of others.

"I wasn't born into a ranching family and didn't inherit any ranchland," Taggart explains. "And it's very difficult to lease enough country to have an

economically viable ranching unit, something that will support a family."

He gave it a shot at first, but input costs were killing him, and he started considering a more economical way to ranch, one with fewer inputs and better bottom lines.

"We were just spending and spending, so of course we were losing money," he says. "With a smaller operation, it's tough to make a profit when your inputs are too high. So, what we have done, over time, is we have virtually eliminated the inputs."

Living Laboratory born from curiosity

While he has made a lot of improvements since he began leasing his Grandview land, Taggart is not one to sit idle or grow complacent. He is always learning and doing more. And a few years ago, he became

increasingly curious about the most important factor to his success — good grass.

“I wondered, why did certain grasses come up in some pastures, but not others where we had planted it? What was the difference? Why did we get more of one grass in one pasture but less in another when we had treated them the same? I suspected that soil health was the difference,” he says.

He did not know the answers, but he knew who would be the best to help him find them: his contacts at the Texas Christian University Ranch Management program. It is a program he is well-acquainted with — and not only because he and his son are both alumni. (The elder Taggart completed the evening program in 1985, while his son, Ben, graduated from the traditional program in 2017.)

“Back in the mid-1990s, I had the privilege of following John Merrill (director of TCU’s ranch management program from 1961 to 1994) on the Dixon Ranch in Parker County,” Taggart explains. “He is my mentor, like he has been to so many others, and I’m grateful I had the opportunity to capitalize on and learn from his management of that ranch.”

By 2003, the program had added Taggart’s operation to its list of field trip spots, and they have returned every year since. As that relationship has grown, Taggart has learned more about the ranch management principles — and become a big fan along the way.

“I really believe in what they teach and how they teach it,” he says. “It’s just so different from other curriculums. Not only is the business aspect a big component, but they also stress sustainable practices. They cover it all and the way they have nailed it all together is really impressive.”

Over the last several years, the program has put a bigger emphasis on soil health, so partnering with them to find the answers made perfect sense.

No end in sight

Jeffrey Geider, Texas Christian University’s William Watt Matthews Director of the Institute of Ranch Management, says that since forming the Living Laboratory with Taggart, the Texas Christian University Department of Environmental Sciences and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services, they have only just begun to gather the information. But they have already learned some things and look forward to diving a lot deeper.

“We’re looking at biodiversity of plant species, soil, moisture,” Geider says. “I’ve been talking about these

things for decades, but now we are going to be able to put some solid data behind it.”

There have already been some surprises in Living Laboratory. “I’m starting to see native plants down there that I’ve never seen before,” Geider says. “It’s really exciting to me.”

To Taggart, as well. “I recently spotted a new plant. This stuff is everywhere. I sent a video to Jeff of a cow just chowing down on it,” Taggart says. “It’s a legume and I’m guessing it is pretty high in protein. It’s obviously beneficial and it’s increasing biodiversity. It’s just so exciting that after all this time out here, we can still learn new things about the land.”

Geider says that while the Living Laboratory is still young, it will continue indefinitely, so they can continue to find more answers — some to questions probably not even thought of yet.

“I really can’t overemphasize that there really isn’t an end to this,” he says. “Because you know, weather changes... everything changes.”

Eventually, they hope to look at the economic side of Taggart’s operation, too. But that is farther down the road, Geider says.

“There’s a lot of data to collect before we get to that point,” he explains.

‘So simple it’s stupid’

Not only will the data answer Taggart’s questions and give Geider concrete examples for the classroom, but he says it will help other ranchers, too.

“We’re not trying to be prescriptive in what we’re doing,” Geider says. “We’re just trying to present data that says, ‘Under this type of management system, these are the results we are seeing.’ Cattlemen can then tailor the information to suit their own needs.”

Taggart agrees.

“Yeah, I’m in the grass-fed beef business and I run a grass-fed operation, but these practices work for traditional ranching operations, too,” he says. “No matter what. Whether you’re running stockers or a cow-calf operation or sheep or whatever, these practices can help you.”

The practices, he explains, are all built around the idea of taking advantage of the resources you have and the ones that were there before you, while also using well-adapted introduced species.

“That’s what gets us through the droughts and through the winters and through the bugs,” Taggart says. “They’re here and will always be here and they provide biodiversity.”

That biodiversity is especially important to Taggart.

"I harvest cattle every week, so I have to have some grass out here year-round that meets their nutritional needs," he says.

It has worked, too. From 2011 to 2015, when most cattlemen were selling large numbers of cows, Taggart did not have to reduce his stocking rate or miss a week of harvesting.

And while this year has started off rainy and green, Taggart knows you always have to prepare for the next drought.

"It started last week," he says, referring to the day after it last rained.

Though they are early in the data collection, Taggart has already made some changes based on what they see.

"I have always done a lot of 'Let's try this and see what happens,'" he says. "Now we can do that and get some data to back up the decisions."

For example, he ran a hotwire through a predominately switchgrass pasture last year and grazed one portion heavier than the other. He has also mowed and collected clippings on tall native pastures and made comparisons. In both instances, it was clear what worked, so he decided to start doing things the better way.

Want to follow along at home? Here is where you start.

"Everyone is going to have different objectives for what they want to do with their property," Geider says. "But everyone can manage from the soil up."

He encourages all cattlemen to start by identifying their resources and the potential capability of those resources under their management system.

"If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times. My management system is so simple it's stupid," Taggart says. "I'm just doing things the way the Great Plains were managed long before we got here."

Geider says Taggart's willingness to experiment is one of the biggest reasons the partnership works so well.

"He tries a lot of different things trying to find the best way," Geider says. "And that's the true moniker of the Living Laboratory. It's just like what you would do in a traditional lab, yet it's in the real world instead of some room on a college campus." ■