



SPIRITED VIEW

Stupid to the last tree

Trees don't always receive the respect they deserve for diversifying the landscape and improving agricultural productivity



CHRISTOPH WEDER

Survey says, the summer of 2009 was another dry one here at Spirit View! May 1st to August 25th precipitation averaged 1.25 inches / month. This now brings our total to one wet year, two near normal years and four dry ones out of the seven years we have been on this ranch.

However, for as little rain as we have had, it is still amazing to see what Mother Nature can produce when the right combinations of factors are present. Certainly decent winter snow fall is one of the factors, but so too are factors like high percentage legume pastures, high intensity/short duration grazing with long rest periods and one other key factor, trees.

I know I have written extensively about grazing management, legume pastures and rotational grazing, but I have mentioned in limit the value of trees and bush cover. I am as guilty as many and ashamed that, something that can take a life time to grow, can get so little attention, especially when their benefits are so irrefutable.

The land we graze is varied in terms of bush cover; some with lots and some without. So too is the rented land that we make hay on. This year, in our immediate area hay yields averaged 1-¼ to 1-½ bales per acre, yet one field in particular that we refer to as "Jurassic Park" averaged over three bales per acre and received no more moisture than any of the other fields. What made the difference? Its arboretum of mature trees. To some this field would be a GPS night mare. The quarter is a labyrinth of bush pockets mixed with 70 acres of hay and 20 acres of crop. Many would look at the trees as a waste of good farmland, yet these 70 acres produced more bales than entire quarters that were open end to end!!! Add to its hay production, habitat for a resident herd of 50 elk, three to four moose, one black bear and three cubs, plus many white tail, mule deer and birds we haven't had time to count, and this quarter is an all-star winner!!! Yet most that drive by hardly notice and those who do seem more impressed with the fields across the road that are open end to end, one-half by one mile, in size.

Why, on one hand, is agriculture in awe of monoculture fields that are open from end to end and at the same time revile fields of polyculture? Were our pastures monoculture fields of grass with no trees to slow the wind, catch the snow and shade the ground, we would have long run short of forage and fodder for our cattle. It's sad that for all the evidence trees have given to their roll in modifying the environment, that there are still

those who try to cast doubt and down play their importance.

There is no doubt in our mind that trees on our land have helped to reduce the effects of drought on forage production. They have helped our fields catch the winter's snow and conserve the spring moisture. They have provided additional forage during drought through browse, habitat for all sorts of creepy crawlies; diversity to mundane landscapes; adventures for a three and five-year-old; clean air for us to breathe and tranquility for those that take time to listen, breath and feel our green leaved friends....

Recently our MD infrastructure staff was asked to clear

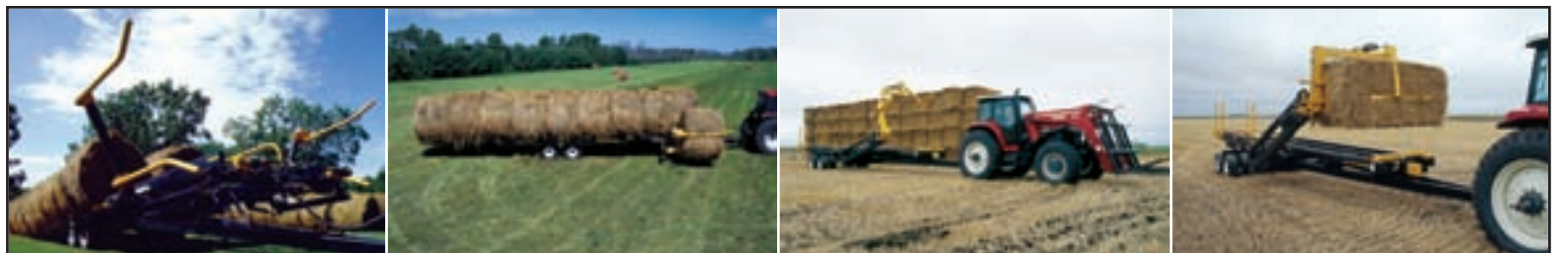
a row of trees along the west side of our local cemetery. They obliged and one afternoon brought in a track hoe to make sure those pesky aspen would not regrow. No one could give me a reason why the trees had to go, however, I can imagine someone must have complained about the leaves. I thought this was funny considering the main occupants of the land are six-foot under. But, sad though that even in death our society is stupid to the last tree.

Dr. Christoph E. Weder is a purebred Angus breeder in the Peace region of Alberta and also runs SVR Ranch Consulting. He is also a founding member of Prairie Heritage Beef Producers For additional info check out www.spiritviewranch.com



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPH WEDER

A favorite trail at Spirit View Ranch in Alberta's Peace River Region.



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