

One Skeptic Takes Another Look at Low-Stress Stockmanship

Steve Leonard is a private range and riparian management consultant. As an ecologist and a former Grazing Management Specialist for the National Riparian Service Team, he's had the opportunity to evaluate grazing management and its impact on several thousand miles of streams. At one time, he was convinced that riding alone could not keep cattle off riparian areas for any length of time. His experiences with herding were to chase cows off riparian areas only to have them return as soon as he was out of sight.

Some of Steve's colleagues persisted in the notion that it could be done if low-stress stockmanship and placement techniques were used correctly. Steve was convinced they were dealing with very unique situations and remained doubtful. He refused to include stockmanship techniques in his course on Grazing Management for Riparian Areas. He was finally convinced to take a stockmanship course and judge for himself.

Steve says he couldn't have been more wrong in his initial perceptions. Since taking the course, he's had many opportunities to use low-stress stockmanship techniques and help clients apply these techniques. He's become such an advocate that sometimes he's accused of being a fanatic.

Popular livestock journals and papers are full of articles on the negative impacts of stress on animal health and productivity. Low-stress stockmanship techniques help to alleviate stress. In addition, low-stress techniques can improve any existing grazing strategy. Livestock are easier to find, move and place in different pastures. They can be placed on upland sites with a reasonable expectation that they will return to these sites after drinking from a stream, minimizing use in riparian areas and often extending the grazing season.

In 2004, one of Steve's clients faced a 50% reduction in grazing use because he couldn't meet the stubble height requirements along streams on a public land allotment. Using a combination of low-stress stockmanship and molasses blocks on the uplands, stubble height was more than double the agency requirement by the end of the grazing season. No reduction was necessary and weaning weights remained at 600+ lbs. Another client exceeded the agency requirements for stubble height along streams for the first time in her allotment. In addition, weaning weights were 70 lbs. higher than past years, even though cattle were moved nearly every day.

Steve says it's not easy to learn effective low-stress stockmanship methods. It takes more patience and dedication to learn than most of us are used to these days. However, the pay-off can be worth it. The future of grazing on some public allotments may depend on it. There are economic benefits but it simply makes life with cattle a lot easier, which is hard to put a price tag on.