

Living with Bitterweed

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Ford Oglesby, a rancher and mohair buyer in West-Central Texas near San Angelo, has learned to live with the problems of raising sheep in Bitterweed Territory. This area of Texas, known as the Edwards Plateau land resource area, experiences some sheep death loss each year from grazing bitterweed (*Hymenoxys odorata*) late in the winter when there is little other green forage. A carefully managed grazing program helps his sheep survive when many other ranchers have severe poisoning difficulty.

Bitterweed poisoning is not something that has developed recently. A little study of ranch history shows it has been a problem for a long time.

As early as 1904, Oglesby's grandfather had ranches along the Pecos River about 60 miles from the 16,000 acre ranch that Oglesby operates now near the town of Eldorado south of San Angelo.

"Only cattle were run year-round on the home place," explained Oglesby. "Sheep were run on the Pecos River ranches through the fall and winter. In the spring they were gathered up and herded to the home ranch. Here they were sheared, marked, culled, and the lambs driven to a railroad siding 20 miles to the north for shipping. The main sheep herd stayed at the home ranch for the summer and then were driven back to the Pecos River in the fall."

"In about 1926, sheep were wintered on this ranch for the first time. That's when trouble with bitterweed really started. The weed was here all along, but it wasn't a problem because the sheep were gone when poisoning usually occurs."

In about 1936, Oglesby's father came up with the idea of concentrating sheep in a bitterweed-free pasture during the winter to avoid poisoning.

"My father found that if he could keep the sheep off the weed while it was young and tender, they wouldn't graze it hard enough in the spring when it was stemmy and rank to cause poisoning problems," Oglesby continued. "Sheep prefer the tender young growth on weeds and normally won't eat the rank mature plant if they have a choice."

Oglesby, a cooperater with the Eldorado-Divide Soil and Water Conservation District, watches his sheep carefully in the early fall. If good rains occur after September 15, chances are good that bitterweed growth will be heavy.

"Sheep have a pretty high tolerance for bitterweed toxicity and it takes a while for them to develop poisoning symptoms," Oglesby said. "When my sheep show the first sign of sickness, we slowly drift the individual herds to the 'clean' pasture."

After the sheep have had several days to settle down in their new pasture, Oglesby starts warming them up on high protein feed. He gradually builds them up to 3/4 pound of 41 percent protein feed per day. To balance the needs of the sheep during the dry winter, he begins feeding corn for energy in addition to the protein feed.

"I gradually build up the feed level to 3/4 pound of protein one day and then 3/4 pound of corn the next," Oglesby explained. "The clean pasture is rested as much as possible



Ford Oglesby examines a recent seeding following treedoing of redberry juniper on his operation near Eldorado in Southwest Texas. Dozing and seeding is a part of his overall ranch management.

during the growing season so there is plenty of dry grass available. The herd really has some good groceries while they are in this pasture."

In the early spring when sheep are moved out of the clean winter pasture, there are usually enough fresh young grass and desirable forbs to graze so that bitterweed is not much of a problem.

"Even during dry years, the sheep forage is a little fresher after it has been deferred for a while," Oglesby said. "I move my sheep herds from pasture to pasture occasionally to keep them grazing good, fresh feed as much as possible. This also improves the ground cover and gives noxious weeds less chance to spread."

"A grass growing plan is my biggest asset in working around the bitterweed problem," he stressed. "I work toward growing enough quality feed on the ground that I can offer livestock something better to eat when the time comes."

"We stock pretty light with cattle, sheep, and goats. The herds are moved around enough to provide each pasture a good rest when it really counts. To make up for light stocking, I pasture steers during the winter when there's enough feed on the ground. Each fall I evaluate how much grass the ranch grew and decide whether or not the land can support some steers for the winter. This gives me the flexibility I really need to run this ranch efficiently."

"My father taught me during the depression and again during the drought of the 1950s that ranch improvements which help manage grazing are a lot cheaper than buying hay," concluded Oglesby. "We've ranched with this in mind for the past 44 years."