


<p>MARCH 24, 2016</p> <p>Livestock Weekly</p> <p>Internet Edition</p>	 <p>News</p>	<p>Producers Livestock Auction</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Columnists Markets Hindsight Weather Cartoon Buyer's Dir. Hotlinks Archives Classifieds Advertise Web Traffic Subscribe Contact Us Home 	<h2>Sonora Experiment Station Head Recaps 45 Years At The Helm</h2> <p>By Colleen Schreiber</p> <p>SONORA — It's common to hear ranchers — young and old — say that ranching is all they ever wanted to do. It's not often, that anyone says they've wanted to be the superintendent of an experiment station since they were a teenager. That would be Dr. Charles "Butch" Taylor.</p> <p>Taylor did exactly what he set out to do, to be the superintendent of an experiment station. For the last 45 years his name has been synonymous with the experiment station at Sonora. He's been superintendent since 1983, and come May 31 he will officially retire as the Sonora station marks its 100th anniversary.</p> <p>As a teenager, Taylor was on the Pecos County 4-H judging team. On one particular occasion the team traveled to Balmorhea Experiment Station, where an annual bull test was held. The team looked at the animals on test and was given a tour of the place.</p> <p>"I decided right then that was what I wanted to do," Taylor says.</p> <p>Ranching, he adds, simply wasn't an option.</p> <p>"My granddad had farmland in Comanche and he lived up into his 90s, but I didn't have the money to buy him out."</p> <p>Taylor was born in 1944. His family lived at Dickens until he was in the fifth grade. His father farmed dryland cotton and also worked as a county agent during the drouth of the 1950s.</p> <p>"He went that route to ensure he could feed his family," Taylor says.</p> <p>He describes his dad as an "old-fashioned" hands-on county agent.</p> <p>"He was the local veterinarian, pest manager and local gardening expert. He did it all."</p> <p>Young Taylor often went with his dad on the weekends to work with some of the area ranches, including the Four Sixes and the Pitchfork.</p> <p>"It was a great life, and I have lots of fond memories of those years," Taylor says.</p>	

He was not happy early on when his dad took a job as an Extension economist in Fort Stockton. He eventually adjusted.

After graduating from Fort Stockton High School, Taylor went off to Texas A&M. His dad had graduated from A&M College in 1932. It was a big deal, because his dad's own father had died when he was just a young kid. Both his father and his younger sister came down with the flu while traveling by wagon to Spur. Butch Taylor's father and grandmother returned home to live with his father's grandparents.

Taylor recalls his dad telling him how he'd been offered a \$100 scholarship from A&M.

"He'd never seen \$100 in his life," Taylor says. "I think he thought they were going to give him \$100 cash, but of course there was no cash. The only way he could afford to go to college even with that \$100 scholarship was to milk cows at the dairy. That was seven days a week, and during the holidays he had to stay there and take care of those cows."

Taylor says his father never pressured or pushed him toward A&M.

"I had a great deal of respect for my dad, and I figured if I did what he had done, I'd be doing the right thing."

For a young man who was interested in agriculture and who already knew that he wanted to be superintendent of a research station, it was also a natural fit. Taylor entered A&M in the fall of 1963.

Taylor originally planned to major in animal science. His dad suggested that he might want to consider range science instead. He had heard there was a shortage and lots of opportunities in that profession, so Taylor ultimately went that route.

"That was the kind of influence he had on me," Taylor says of his father.

He admits he had second thoughts about his major during his freshman year, and was on the verge of changing, but in the first semester of his sophomore year he took a range ecology class taught by Dr. Dyksterhuis. Dyksterhuis is known for coming up with the increaser, decreaser, and invader concept used by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"In his class we talked about rangeland succession and the grazing history, and how that related to the ranching industry," Taylor recalls. "It made me want to learn more, so I stuck with it, and the next semester I took another course from him, and after that I was hooked."

He also had a range nutrition class taught by Dr. Don Huss, a Menard native.

“He taught me that understanding animal nutrition was very important in managing livestock on rangelands.”

Taylor finished his undergraduate work in 1968 and entered the Army. He went through officer training school while at A&M, and he knew full well that there was a 90 percent chance he would end up in Vietnam. His tour there lasted from 1969 to 1970.

After Vietnam he returned to A&M and began a graduate program, where he studied under Dr. Mort Kothmann. Originally his graduate work was to take him to the experiment station at Vernon, but a week or two later he was informed that he would be headed to the experiment station between Rocksprings and Sonora. That was in 1970.

When Taylor arrived there with his wife, Cleone, and his baby son, Trey, in tow, he knew immediately that this was where he was meant to be.

“I knew I was home, and somehow I knew I would be staying,” Taylor says. “It really is kind of amazing how things fell into place.”

All those years ago when he decided his career path he knew that he didn't just want to work at an Experiment Station but wanted to live on the station as well.

“I wanted my kids to have the same experience that I had growing up in Dickens,” Taylor says. “I wanted that kind of lifestyle again.”

The Sonora Station is unique in that when it was built by the ranching community it was built with families in mind.

“Being 28 miles from either Rocksprings or Sonora, back then it was an all-day trip, and if it rained and the draws got up, well, they were stuck,” explains Taylor. “So they felt they had to have residences on the place to serve the people who worked there.”

The Taylors lived in the “big house”, built in 1918, with another graduate student who also had a family. They lived upstairs and the Taylors lived downstairs.

In the early days, a school teacher was hired to teach all the kids on the station. When the Taylor family arrived, the little community was 10 families strong. However, by then the option of schooling the kids at the station was long gone. School or no school, the family atmosphere up through the 1980s was unmistakable. During the weekends and the summers the families often gathered for volleyball matches and the kids swam in the tank and did everything that other ranch kids did.

After Taylor finished his master's degree, a technician position came open. He didn't hesitate. He was soon promoted to research associate and then research scientist. Still, Taylor knew that if he was going to have a chance to be in charge to fulfill his lifelong dream, he would need a PhD.

There was some initial pushback about him getting all three degrees from A&M, but Taylor explained that with a young family — by then he and Cleone had three sons — he could only afford to go to A&M because he could go back on half salary, and that was more than what an assistantship paid. Even with that and his GI bill, he would still have to borrow money. Taylor eventually won out.

His master's work was actually a cattle project, but when he became a fulltime employee he did a lot of work on foraging strategies and diet quality of sheep, goats and white-tailed deer. His doctorate study was in goat nutrition.

Taylor became the superintendent of the Sonora Station in 1983. He followed in the footsteps of men such as Dr. Dameron, one of the early superintendents; Dr. Leo Merrill was running the show when Taylor first arrived at the station in 1970.

Merrill's four-pasture grazing system brought widespread recognition to the station beginning in the 1950s.

One of Taylor's first projects after becoming a fulltime employee was a grazing systems study comparing the Merrill four-pasture to the Savory grazing method.

Taylor says the real lesson from that project was that the most important problem in managing rangeland is determining the proper stocking rate. If stocking rate is not managed properly, nothing works.

Woody plant encroachment on rangeland is another problem. In 1950 all of the cedar was hand cleared on the station. By the 1970s it was already having a big impact on the productivity of the land, Taylor says.

Taylor has accomplished a great deal in his 45-year stint at the Sonora Experiment Station. Empowering and equipping ranchers with the tools to manage their land is perhaps his greatest contribution. More specifically, he's been a promoter and an educator of prescribed fire as one of the most viable tools for managing rangelands.

Taylor first learned about the value of prescribed fire while working on his master's degree. He took a fire ecology class under Dr. Charles Scifres. He also became familiar with the fire work being done by Dr. Henry Wright at Texas Tech University, as his office

mate then was Carlton Britton, a student of Wright's. Then, when he was in the Army, he saw first-hand what fire could do.

At Fort Sill, "The impact-zone on the firing range caught fire every summer," Taylor says, "and it was the most beautiful grassland I'd ever seen. I probably was the only one in that whole class that knew what Indiangrass was and appreciated how it burned."

He saw the same thing at Fort Hood and something similar in Vietnam.

"Those intense fires in the hot, dry summer were very devastating for the woody plants, but the grass flourished. That made an impression on me."

Unfortunately, Dr. Merrill was not a pro-fire person. He would only burn under minimum conditions if at all.

"He was very cautious, and thus he concluded fire didn't work very well for the Sutton County landscape. However, I give him a lot of credit for trying. After Dr. Merrill retired, I knew that was the direction we needed to go."

He started prescribed fire research in the 1980s, and in the mid-1990s an August wildfire burned 20 or so acres on the station. That fire reinforced Taylor's theory that hot summer fire was also worth researching.

They started out small, doing some summer fires. The results proved his theory.

After they felt confident with their techniques and the new prescriptions, they took it to the ranch scale. The first big burn they did was across the road from the Experiment Station entrance.

"It looked like scorched earth afterwards. It killed cedars 20 feet tall," says Taylor. "And the grass response was tremendous a couple of years later."

The results continued to reinforce his theory that to restore the native range, to transform it from a closed cedar canopy to a functioning ecosystem, hot summer fires had to be part of the management scheme, at least initially.

Not everyone agreed, though. Taylor had many critics, including the then USDA Soil Conservation Service, and even some of his own research colleagues were critical of him.

"They thought it was an irrational thing to do, that the prescriptions that had been developed by Henry Wright worked and that what we were doing was reckless and that it jeopardized the use of fire."

The SCS, in fact, initiated a policy preventing employees from participating on any summer burn.

“I understood how Henry Wright must have felt when he was trying to get his burning prescriptions accepted. He, too, had a lot of resistance. And to be fair, I understood the resistance,” Taylor admits. “The data was not published yet; we had replicated studies here and we were continuing to collect data, but we really hadn’t published much in peer review journal articles.”

Taylor invited the ranching community in to view the work they were doing with fire. As more became educated and more successful burns were done, acceptance came first and foremost from them, the ranching community. They were the ones who mattered, after all. Some wanted to use summer fire on their own ranches.

In October 1997 the station hosted a prescribed burning field day. Ranchers looked at the summer burning treatments and the winter burning treatments.

“I just asked what they liked best. The summer burning won unanimously,” Taylor said.

The ultimate goal, however, was to pull the ranching community together in an effort to get fire applied on the ground. To do that, Taylor’s idea was to form a rancher-led prescribed burn association.

“I explained that if they wanted to do summer burns, that they had to get organized and work together,” Taylor says. “Not only that, I explained that to change the fire culture, they had to work with the local communities and get local officials, volunteer fire departments, and the like, on their side. They also needed equipment, and they needed to get trained.”

Taylor’s strategy worked. On that day the end result was the formation of the Edwards Plateau Prescribed Burning Association. The ranchers at first wanted to put Taylor in charge. He refused.

“It had to be a rancher-run operation. I told them I wasn’t even going to be a member. I was there to help facilitate the process and provide information if need be, but it had to be run by the ranchers.”

Ultimately, it was that bottom-up type approach, he insists, that has made the organization successful.

Taylor didn’t stop there, though. His goal was to have a burn association in every county in the state before he retired. He won’t reach that goal, but he’s a long way there. Today there are 10 regional burning associations across the state that encompass some 119 counties.

And some years ago, thanks to Taylor’s research and persistence,

NRCS developed a summer burn prescription. Today NRCS employees who have sufficient training may participate on a summer burn.

Though they haven't been able to completely change the fire culture, they've made a good start, he says, and more fire is definitely being applied on the landscape. Persistent drouth, he acknowledged, has slowed the momentum some. Burn bans initially posed a real problem for those who wanted to burn, but here again Taylor and the ranching community came up with a partial solution. By working with local county governments and gaining a reputation of being able to safely and effectively burn, some county judges have started providing exemptions to burn association members during burn bans.

Burn associations have also had some influence on the state certification burning program. There are four different categories of certification. Landowners who get a private certification can get good insurance through Farm Bureau, and anyone who is certified can burn during a burn ban.

Brian Treadwell, Christoval, is an example of a commercial certified burn manager. He recently completed a 2000-acre burn at a lake at Benbrook, just outside of Fort Worth.

"That's an example of a rather large fire occurring right in the middle of a major urban area," Taylor points out. "Fire is nature's herbicide. It's natural; that should be our selling point with the city people. It's what a lot of people like."

However, he added, doing a better job of managing smoke has to be a priority.

Thanks to El Niño, already the EPPBA has done more burns this winter than in a long time, and many more are on the books. The Sonora Station also conducts three burn schools a year; the last two schools filled up and they had to turn people away.

When Taylor retires, he's going to take the burn schools on the road.

As his retirement date nears, Taylor has had a chance to ponder a lot of things. He has but one regret.

"If I knew what I know now, I would have started burning on the station a lot earlier," he says.

Forty-five years at the same job is a monumental accomplishment, especially these days. And while Taylor says he's looking forward to retirement, there will undoubtedly be parts of the job that he will miss.

"You don't walk away from doing something for 45 years and not

miss it,” Taylor says, “but I’ll be here for field days, and I’ll still be interacting with the ranchers by teaching burn schools.”

Taylor admits he has a lot of satisfaction in fulfilling his ultimate goal, but he gives a lot of credit to his wife, Cleone.

“If things aren’t happy at home, they’re not going to be happy at work. She made it all possible, and I owe her a lot.”

After 40 years, he and Cleone moved to “town”. They bought a little place outside of Sonora. Cleone finally got to have her own house. Taylor figures it was the least he could do, given all she did for him over the years.

As his tenure comes to a close, Taylor is counting his blessings.

“If you have a dream and you believe it and you work for it, there’s a chance that it will work out,” Taylor says. “A lot of things could have happened along the way that could have changed my path ... I mean how many can say they got to do exactly what they wanted to do for 45 years at one place ... and then to get to be associated with all the good people; the graduate students have been a real joy.”

The way he sees it, he’s won three lotteries.

“Just being born in America is like winning the lottery, he says. “People don’t appreciate that anymore, and then being born in Texas is like winning another lottery, but really, I’ve won three lotteries because I’ve got Cleone, and she allowed me to do what I wanted to do and live where I wanted to live,” he concludes.

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