

A REGENERATIVE RANCHING PUBLICATION FROM NOBLE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

# LEGACY

FALL 2023 | VOL. 17, ISSUE 2



## From Pasture to Plate

The journey of locally grown, healthy meat into retail stores isn't an easy one, but it's one that is bringing physical and financial health to its producers, retailers and consumers.

### ALSO INSIDE:

Matt Cadman of Shady Grover Ranch understands why more Americans seek locally raised, grass-fed meat sources

Two Texas brothers transition their generational ranch from set-stocking and row crops to rotational grazing

An Iraq War veteran's heart for service is now regenerating the soil on his Michigan farm

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LEGACY

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Noble Research Institute, LLC (www.noble.org) is an independent nonprofit agricultural research organization headquartered in Ardmore, Oklahoma. Noble's mission is to guide farmers and ranchers in applying regenerative principles that yield healthier soil, more productive grazing land, and business success. Achievement of this goal will be measured by farmers and ranchers profitably regenerating hundreds of millions of acres of U.S. grazing lands. Noble aims to remove, mitigate or help producers avoid the barriers that deter the lasting use of regenerative, profitable land management practices in grazing animal production.

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THESE ARE ALL OF OUR STORIES

I didn't grow up on a ranch. When I came to Noble, I couldn't tell a Hereford from a Red Angus. I didn't know the struggles and challenges ranchers face every day. I appreciated their work, but I had no concept how much work it really required.

Fast forward seven years. Now, I get why it's so important to tell the story of the rancher. Because the rancher story is timeless.

And for good reason. It's a story about perseverance and hard work, ingenuity and sacrifice. It's about what it takes to sustain the life of every person on the planet, from the food we eat to the water we drink and the air we breathe. The rancher story is a story with weighty implications, but it's also something more.

It's the story about the best parts of us all. It's the story of facing challenges, sometimes impossible ones, and never giving up. It's a story about never losing hope, no matter what obstacles you face.

It's the story of Vance Mitchell, who has challenged the status quo to build a system that makes ranching fun and easy.

It's Matt Cadman's story of overcoming a rare illness that led him to seek out and now produce healthier food.

And it's Nick Rodgers' story of finding healing on the land as he works to heal the soil.

It's your story. It's our story.

What you'll always find inside the pages of Legacy is that enduring spirit of perseverance and hope. Even though there may be mountains in your path, may the timeless stories from the pastures of America give you the encouragement and strength to keep going.

Rachael Davis  
EDITOR

NOBLE RANCHES

# Managing Through Drought

BY MARILYN CUMMINS

**THE RECENT DROUGHT YEARS** have been both rough and rewarding for the Noble Ranches. Here's how following regenerative principles and making tough decisions have preserved our grassland resources as we care for our livestock.



Calves on grass with pecan orchards on Noble's Red River Ranch in the background.

**D**rought conditions bring tough decisions on a ranch, in the face of many unknowns. When will it rain again? How long will your grass hold out? Do you keep your herd and buy hay? How deep do you cut if you decide to destock?

For the managers of the Noble Ranches, one goal took precedence and drove a lot of those tough decisions during 2021 and especially 2022: stewarding the grassland resource for the long term.

"Our main focus was to make sure that we're not permanently degrading the resource," says Joe Pokay, general ranch manager at Noble. With nearly 14,000 acres to manage over seven different properties, he and his team followed regenerative principles to make the key stocking, breeding and grazing decisions that got them through the drought period without overgrazing the land or breaking the bank buying hay.

That's not to say they didn't take major hits. They reduced the cow herd by about 30%, sold all their steer calves after weaning (usually retained to 900-weights) and didn't buy stocker animals in the spring to supplement their stocking ranch — normally a large part of the ranch income, Pokay says.

"We decided not to do that because we didn't have enough forage," he says. "Our stewardship was screaming at us, 'please don't put any more animals out here, 'cause I can't take it.'"

So here is how Pokay and his managers listened to the land and rode out the drought the last two years and into 2023, chalking up some wins along with the losses and learning several lessons along the way.



Noble ag consultant Steve Swaffar illustrates how to use a yardstick to calculate forage density in a pasture.

## TAKING STOCK OF AVAILABLE FORAGE

Every two weeks, Noble ranch managers and staff measure the grass and other forage available in their pastures. Starting out, they clip and weigh the grass as well as use a grazing stick to measure forage height and density.

"Clipping and weighing the grass is a great way to calibrate your eye," Pokay says. "When you're doing that so often, you get really good at doing visual estimation." The measurements then factor into computing how many animal days per acre of grazing are available. After a graze, they estimate and record the number of pounds of forage consumed per acre, which is easier to compare

across ranches than using animal unit days per acre. All grazing information is recorded daily to retain data for summary statistics and future planning.

As Chance Tynes, ranch manager for Noble's Oswalt Ranch, describes it, when they're getting moisture and the grass is growing really well, "you have regrowth behind you, so you start adding that up as you're taking (grazing) it off. Once the fall gets here, and the grass quits growing, that's when you look at deficit measurements as you go, because you know what you're going to have to get through all winter long."

As continued drought became evident in 2022, Pokay says they wanted to be sure to have enough grass on the ranches to

**"Our stewardship was screaming at us, 'please don't put any more animals out here, 'cause I can't take it.'"**

—JOE POKAY



Two years of drought meant tough decisions on Noble's ranches, including culling a number of cows and selling off steer calves at weaning, like these on the Red River Ranch.

graze the cows and small ruminants all the next winter without having to feed any hay. They also wanted to keep a 50 animal-unit buffer of extra grazing grass. All without knowing for sure how much rain was going to come.

"You really want to be able to know how much forage you have and know where you stand at the beginning of the

drought," Pokay says. "That way you can capture the value of the market before it gets flooded with cows."

#### CULLING BY CONCEPTION

After crunching all the numbers, the Noble ranches needed to cut the 700-head cow herd by 30% to have enough

forage and minimize hay feeding through the winter. Unfortunately, even though they knew that early in the year, a decision they had made to be more in sync with nature worked against them when it was time to destock.

"We very easily could have kept everything, but the ranch would have been in terrible shape this spring," Pokay says, looking back. "We know that if we abuse our resource ... that's a negative cascading effect that will just keep rippling through into the next year and years after that."

So the painful decision to destock was made, which he says a lot of people say should be done by selling your oldest cows first.

"But if you're selling bred cows and keeping open cows, it's not really helping you for the next year," Pokay says.

"So we decided to cull on conception, and we wanted to cull about 30% of all the cows. We felt we could get a 70% conception rate by shortening our breeding season by two weeks, the result was an average conception of 71.5% across all the cows.

The year before, Noble had changed its breeding and calving timing to later in the year instead of calving in the middle of winter, usually January and February.

"So from our holistic, not drought-induced, management goals, we wanted to move our calving back," he says, partly to help match when dams have high nutritional requirements while lactating with when the grass comes on in the spring. Because of the drought and the need to destock, they shortened the calving season, as well.

"We just decided to pull the trigger and say this is the breeding season now, and the cows that will calve in that season are the ones that'll get bred in our short breeding season," he says.

"So they sort of selected themselves. If we'd done that in a year that we weren't forced to sell 30% of the cows, it would be a pretty big hit. But because we had to sell them anyway, we tried to make lemonade out of lemons, I guess."

But moving the calving back and turning the bulls out later meant doing pregnancy checking later in order to cull open cows, and that had a cost.

"Those 80 days were stressful, because we had a lot more cows than

By using regenerative grazing and destocking, cattle still had forage to graze through the winter, including here on the Red River Ranch one frosty February morning.



we had grass for, and we were just waiting to make sure everything was going to work the way we thought it would," Pokay says. "The more you keep pushing things off till later during the drought, the more people start wholesaling, liquidating cows. And so the longer you're holding onto the cows, the less valuable they become."

They didn't do "terrible" on the cows they sold, "but we would have done a lot better if we could have sold them sooner."

As mentioned earlier, the Noble Ranches also sold all the steer calves rather than keeping them to heavier weights, and didn't buy stocker cattle for summer grazing. But they were able to keep most of their heifer calves as a low-cost way to grow their cow herd with desirable genetics.

#### MORE LEMONADE OUT OF LEMONS

On the Oswalt Ranch, which Tynes began managing in January 2023 after 17 years at Noble's Red River Ranch, he

**"I guess the drought was a blessing in a way, because it kind of opened our eyes up to what we can do if we save some stockpile grass during the wintertime."**

—CHANCE TYNES

inherited an unusual situation. Because the drought had dried up all the ponds on the east side of the ranch, where water lines were yet to be installed, no grazing took place on that side of the ranch in the dry summer of 2022.

In early 2023, some rains started to refill the ponds and streams, and some of the new water infrastructure was in place on the east side. The long-rested

grass there was plentiful, and winter annuals came up with the rain.

"So we were able to winter our cattle all winter on the east side, and we calved there, all with very little hay," Tynes says. "I think we fed six or seven bales of hay in all, and that was just during the ice and snow because they couldn't get to what they needed to graze."

"I guess the drought was a blessing in a way, because it kind of opened our eyes up to what we can do if we save some stockpile grass during the wintertime," he says. "If we hadn't had the grass, we would have had to feed probably 20 to 40 pounds of hay a day a piece, and that gets expensive."

The ranch, which is hilly with a lot of woods and brush, currently supports not only 100 mother cows and 76 yearling heifers, but also about 1,200 nanny goats with kids that grazed behind the cattle in rotation in a lease arrangement between the owner of the goats and Noble.

"We let the cows take the top-best third to half of the grass off and keep them moving, then the goats come in

and clean up under the trees and help clear up some of the brush,” Tynes says.

In June, Tynes says the grass on Oswald Ranch was responding to the rains enough “that we’ve got enough grass in front of us to probably go nearly all winter long, even if it stops raining now. And we also have water available everywhere now, so we can use smaller paddocks in our rotation and know for sure we’ll have enough forage in front of them to go to spring.”

**VALUABLE LESSONS LEARNED**

Even with improved conditions once a drought eases, Tynes cautions against stocking up too quickly. “A lot of people see good rains and the grass growing, and think ‘well, I need more cows; I don’t have enough,’ and buy a bunch of cows. Well, when winter gets here, that’s twice as much hay they’re having to feed if they don’t have any standing grass.”

For Paul Luna, who manages the Noble Headquarters Ranch at Ardmore, the drought year of 2022 changed plans and taught lessons. He was supposed to be starting a grass-fed beef program with stockers, “but we had to kind of

put that on hold. A drought year is not a good year to start a grass-fed program,” he says.

He did, however, take care of the cull cows being bred before they were sold, and grass-fed about 50 lamb rams for sale to a butchery in Texas.

“You know, the lamb rams don’t eat as much, so they were easier to feed out,” Luna says. He moves them three or four times a day to keep them up and grazing and “get them a little fatter.”

Being on the city water supply eliminated any livestock water issues at the ranch during the drought, and rotational grazing plus some destocking meant adequate forage to graze all winter long. The only time Luna fed hay was when it was icy, or when he wanted to bale-graze to use livestock impact on bare ground or over briars.

To control briars, he mows over them and sets out the hay, so the cattle can stomp out the briars and deposit fertilizer in the form of manure and urine.

“I’ve done that for like three years, and the briars haven’t come back yet,” he says.

Luna says managing through the drought reinforced valuable lessons.

“Make sure you destock accordingly,” he says. “And don’t overgraze your grasses. Give them plenty of rest, and don’t move the livestock back on to them too quick, or it will hurt the root system of the grass.”

**IN GOOD SHAPE FOR THE FUTURE**

As Pokay sums up how things turned out, he counts a lot of positives among the pain.

Using adaptive multi-paddock (AMP) grazing to rest pastures as they could, with stocking levels low enough to avoid overgrazing “had a measurable benefit this spring when it finally did start to rain, because everything was set up to be productive. It wasn’t already set up to be behind again. In May and June, we’ve grown three times as much forage as we grew all of last year, I would say.”

Cash-flow projections were negative for the next year due to destocking, “but we’re probably money ahead, because we still have a good land resource, and we still improved our soil health. Those are things that don’t pay directly, but they have intrinsic value that we capture, even though nobody is really paying us for it.”

He’s glad they kept with their goal of not wanting “to feed our way through the drought, because you never know how long they’re going to last,” he says. “So we wanted to have enough grass plus a buffer so that we could graze the cows all winter and not really have to feed any hay.

“Because that’s the quickest way to go broke, in my opinion -- feeding hay during drought.” The Noble Ranches did buy enough hay to have about 40 days of emergency feed, and finding it was hard and expensive. “That was another challenge, just to have that buffer.”

As it turns out, even with buying that feed and dealing with the drought, “our average feed per head, which includes salt and minerals and protein supplement and hay, for the whole winter on all the ranches was \$104 a head, which is low for a good year,” Pokay says.

“So through our grazing management, moving our breeding season back and the culling that we did, we decreased our feed cost per head in a drought, which is pretty incredible.” 🌱



*Up with the sun, part of the 1,200 goats with kids at side wait their turn to browse a fresh paddock on Noble’s Oswald Ranch once the cattle finish their day’s grazing. The goats will clean up under trees and help clear brush.*



NOBLE RANCHES | COFFEY RANCH

**REGENERATIVE RESEARCH**

**RESEARCH TEAMS** from Noble Research Institute gather data on the native rangeland of the Coffey Ranch as part of the 5-year study: Metrics, Management, and Monitoring: An Investigation of Pasture and Rangeland Soil Health and its Drivers. The short-term monitoring protocol they use will help producers know the ecological health of their grazing lands. 🌱

FROM OUR RANCHES

FROM OUR RANCHES



NOBLE RANCHES | RED RIVER RANCH

## GRAZING DAYS OF SUMMER

**LUSH GRASS** surrounds a cow and her curious calf on a June afternoon at Noble's Red River Ranch at Burneyville, Oklahoma. 🌿

TEACHING THE ESSENTIALS

# Noble Launches Educational Programs

**WITH ITS FIRST CLASS** of ranchers in July in Stephenville, Texas, Noble Research Institute began a new era of offering in-depth, hands-on educational programs based on regenerative principles and practices. During two days of interactive classroom sessions and in-field demonstrations, “Essentials of Regenerative Ranching” gives participants the core knowledge and tools they need to improve the health of their land, livestock and livelihood.

Participant Brendan Bennett, a rancher from San Augustine, Texas, says that in addition to the course curriculum, “There’s a wealth of information and experience from the other producers here. I look forward to being able to go back home to the farm and know that I have them as a resource if I have questions.”

TO LEARN MORE AND REGISTER FOR FUTURE COURSES, GO TO: [www.noble.org/essentials](http://www.noble.org/essentials)

A rancher at the first Noble Essentials of Regenerative Ranching course takes his turn measuring plant height and density to calculate grazeable forage in pastures.

LEOPOLD WINNER

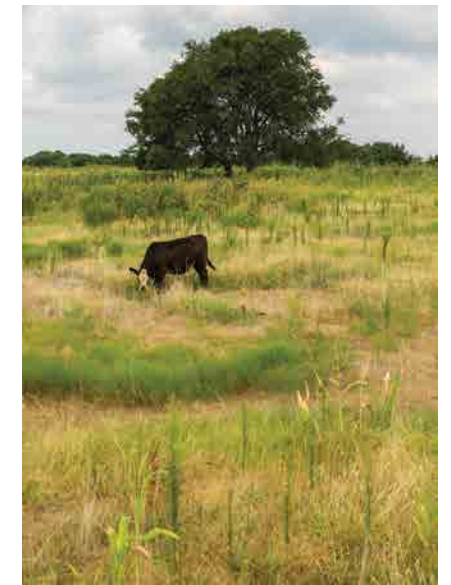
## Focus: Conservation and Cattle

**SPRING VALLEY CATTLE** is 20 years into its conversion from conventional to regenerative ranching. Lance and Anissa Gartner of Glen Ullin, South Dakota, select for grass-based genetics and rotate their cow herd through 88 pastures to graze every day possible.

READ MORE HERE: [bit.ly/regen-ranching-rules](http://bit.ly/regen-ranching-rules)



Photo by Sarah McNaughton



## Back to the Future

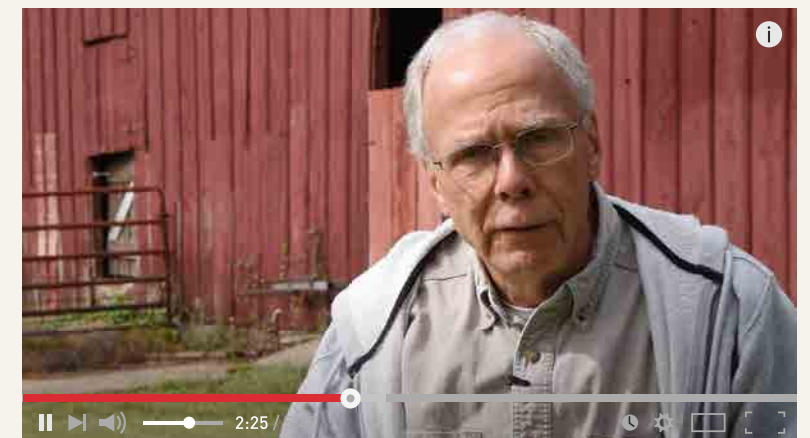
Lead by the appropriately named ecology Ph.D. candidate Aaron Prairie, a research team at Colorado State University found that regenerative practices — including integrating crop and livestock systems — were successful as long-term carbon storage solutions. Their study showed the potential to greatly increase soil organic carbon pools by returning to multiple practices that interact: polyculture farming, cover-cropping, integrated crop-livestock systems, even tillage.

READ MORE HERE: [bit.ly/soil-carbon-storage](http://bit.ly/soil-carbon-storage)

## Saving Iowa Topsoil with Livestock

“Having cover crops is great ... but having a cow on that ground with the cover crops puts that diversity in the soil and that biology into high-gear” says Tom Wind, one of three Iowa farmers who discuss how different grazing systems have improved soil health and reduced erosion on their land. The video is “Regenerative Grazing and Soil Health – Livestock on the Land,” from Practical Farmers of Iowa.

WATCH HERE: [bit.ly/livestock-on-land](http://bit.ly/livestock-on-land)





SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS TO FOLLOW

## From Our Feeds

Social posts and accounts that caught our attention with both fun and facts about grazing and ranching regeneratively.

### HARRIS HOMEPLACE FARM, **INSTAGRAM**

Shot from a drone above the herd, this video shows (and caption explains) how the Harris family uses “The L Method” to keep cows moving forward when changing paddocks.

[bit.ly/the-l-method](https://bit.ly/the-l-method)

### CAITLYN FARMS BEEF CATTLE, **TIKTOK**

To see videos both educational and entertaining of how the ranch bridges the gap between ranching and wildlife conservation, follow the TikTok account [@beefandbobwhites](https://www.tiktok.com/@beefandbobwhites).

[bit.ly/beef-and-bobwhites](https://bit.ly/beef-and-bobwhites)

### REGENERATIVE GRAZING GROUP, **FACEBOOK**

Join more than 28,000 other folks in this private group “for discussions and problem-solving for regeneratively grazing all kinds of critters while improving the health of the animals and the soil.” Find reGenerative Grazing here:

[bit.ly/regen-grazing-group-fb](https://bit.ly/regen-grazing-group-fb)

### TRACKING Y RANCH, **FACEBOOK**

These first-generation ranchers not only graze their own cattle to benefit soil, water, and wildlife, but apply their program of “prescribed conservation grazing” to conservation-easement land and other properties in four Washington-state counties. See their page:

[bit.ly/tracking-y-ranch](https://bit.ly/tracking-y-ranch)

FOREST AND FORAGE

## Beneficial Balancing Act

**INSTEAD OF CLEARING ALL THE LOBLOLLY PINES TREES** on the new acreage he bought in southern Virginia, forester & cattleman Miller Adams cleared 50-foot corridors, had the rest of the trees trimmed to let in sunlight and established switchgrass on the former forest floor. Now his Angus herd grazes the native warm-season forage with enough shade for comfort on muggy summer days. 🌿

READ MORE HERE: [bit.ly/silvopasture-success](https://bit.ly/silvopasture-success)



## Healthy Soils = Quality Forages

Todd Miller and his family were named the 2023 Ohio Conservation Family Farm Award winners for doing what just makes sense to him — both farming and raising his cattle regeneratively. “It’s simple. It saves money, the farm and its natural resources, while helping to produce quality cattle.” 🌿

READ THEIR STORY HERE: [bit.ly/healthy-soils-forages](https://bit.ly/healthy-soils-forages)

## 2 Podcast Episodes To Listen To

### THE BUSINESS OF AGRICULTURE *Regenerative Ranching — For Environment AND Economics*

Noble’s Jim Johnson and Hugh Aljoe discuss the important role grazing land plays in American ag and methods by which to improve soil, environment and your balance sheet.

LISTEN HERE: [bit.ly/biz-of-ag](https://bit.ly/biz-of-ag)

WATCH HERE: [bit.ly/biz-of-ag-video](https://bit.ly/biz-of-ag-video)

### GRAZING GRASS

*Grazing Out of the Box with Michael Vance (Ep. 70)*

This podcast’s mission is helping grass farmers learn from grass farmers, and that’s what Michael Vance does in this episode. His Texas-based operation, Southern Reds, runs more than a thousand head of cattle totally on grass, all on leased land — a thriving business model for him built around regenerative grazing.

LISTEN HERE: [bit.ly/grazing-out-of-box](https://bit.ly/grazing-out-of-box)



## Bye-Bye Building Fence?

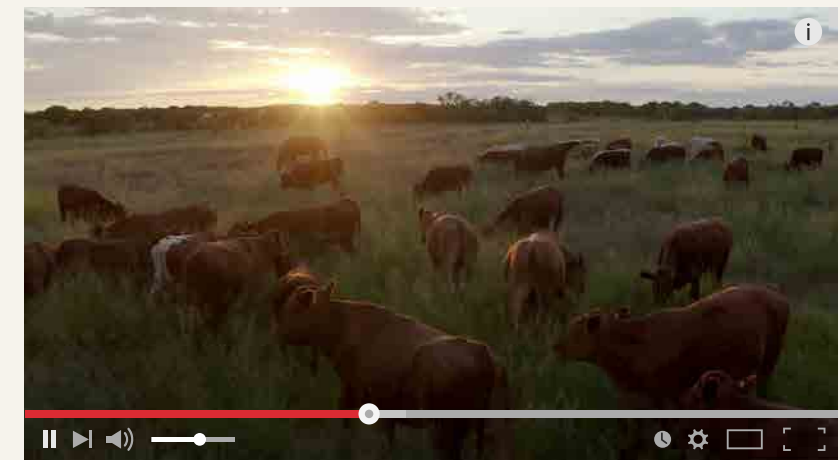
**WHAT IF MOVING COWS** to their next paddock could be as simple as swiping right on a phone app? No, it’s not a simulated grazing game, it’s the virtual fencing being tested in two 5-year pilot projects at working ranches in Kansas and New Mexico. The Nature Conservancy and research partners want to learn if virtual fences help land managers better implement regenerative management practices, while also assessing potential benefits for biodiversity and ranchers’ bottom lines. 🌿

READ MORE HERE: [bit.ly/virtual-fencing](https://bit.ly/virtual-fencing)

## Committed to Healthy Habitats

Mandy Krause says the No. 1 goal on Parker Creek Ranch in Texas is to heal the land, then produce nutritious food for their community. She and her husband, Travis, worked as wildlife biologists and researchers before returning to his family’s ranch to build a homestead and ranch regeneratively. 🌿

SEE THEIR INSPIRING STORY HERE: [bit.ly/healthy-habitats](https://bit.ly/healthy-habitats)





# RANCHING FOR THE FAMILY

**AFTER NEARLY 100 YEARS** of farming and ranching, one Texas family challenged the status quo to build a system that makes ranching fun and easy through regenerative principles.

BY ARIANA BIGHAM



People say never to go into business with family, but that doesn't always hold true in agriculture. There is something uniquely rewarding about owning and operating an agricultural pursuit with your family. A bond that runs deeper. Deeper than good years with padding in the bank. Deeper than hard years when tough choices are a daily chore.



*[Left] The 1800s-era Y-Bar brand of Mitchell Cattle Company is etched into the side of a wooden box that was part of the original ranch chuck wagon. [Right] One of the 500 head of Beefmaster cattle raised today with regenerative grazing on the Lolita, Texas, ranch.*

**F**amily means more.

It's like soil. When you smell freshly dug soil. When you feel the cool, damp earth run through your hand. When you see layers

of rebuilt topsoil and inches of root growth that haven't been present in years. There's an overwhelming sense of accomplishment that tugs at the corners of your eyes. A deep sense of knowing. Knowing something will live on, well beyond our time.

That's the sense of pride Vance Mitchell has for his family's 8th-generation ranch near Lolita, Texas. With eyes alight and a jovial smile, Vance fondly tells the story of Mitchell Cattle Company, a regenerative ranch with roots near the Texas coast that he owns and operates alongside his brother, Steve, and their mother, Janet. His husky accent, thicker and clearer than a typical Southern twang, draws you in as he paints a picture of cattle drives and chuck wagons.

Vance's ancestors started the family business in 1876. The old way of ranching continued until the 1930s, when the family began leasing to tenant farmers. Only 10 miles from the nearest inland bay, the hot, steamy environment was perfect for farming rice. Thirty years later, brackish water crept into the farm's environment and made the water unsuitable to continue rice, so the operation switched to row-crop farming. With the passing of a longtime tenant, the family began farming on its own. They fell into the same routine as many farm families, filled with spraying, planting, spraying, harvesting and spraying some more. Years went by, and the family tired of the destructive routine.

"We got tired of killing things just to grow things," Vance remembers. They decided there must be something better.

In the 1990s, a desire to change combined with a flexible USDA crop program made the choice straightforward. By then, many of the extended family members had sold their pieces of the



original land, so the once-7,000-acre farm and ranch was now down to two locations of around 1,500 acres each. The family practiced set-stock grazing at their homeplace, which made it relatively simple to shut down row-crop farming at the southern location and transition the entire ranch to cattle.

What began as an experiment to fence out a patch of ryegrass grew over time into a full-blown rotational grazing system. The first system in 1992 converted 900 acres of dryland row-crop to grazing with nothing but fence, water, rest and cattle ready to graze. The family decided against planting further, choosing to let nature repopulate the soil without intervention. That year, the Mitchells ran 200 cows through 10 large paddocks. Although many of their fellow ranchers were skeptical they'd succeed, the family never looked back.

Led by the ranch's original innovators, Vance's parents, Mike and Janet, the grazing program grew incrementally over a long period of time, and the family learned through a lot of trial and error. Early challenges were primarily based on infrastructure, with water and fencing high on the list. Back then, the Mitchells used a water trailer and high-density polyethylene pipe to move the water with the cattle. With large paddocks and moves only every 5-to-7 days, moving the water was manageable.

After more learning and growing, the Mitchells decided to double the number of paddocks and try 8-foot-by-16-foot concrete troughs to supply eight paddocks at a time. In an area where ranching sometimes means checking heifers during a hurricane, the central alleyways that led to the concrete troughs quickly became mud pits. Eventually, Vance and Steve divided the paddocks further and built a system using 12 permanent troughs to water four paddocks at a

[Left] Eighth-generation Texas rancher Vance Mitchell opens a tally book to show counts, prices and notes from a 1913 entry. [Right] A portrait of Mitchell's great-great grandfather hangs by the front door of the Mitchell home.



Practicing regenerative grazing has provided benefits beyond simply increasing stocking rates. The cattle became calmer. The soil became richer. The grass became more manageable, and the pests were nearly eliminated. In an area where an oncoming mosquito sounds like a crop duster, Vance laughs, because when his vet calls, it's to tell him he won't be buying wormer for another year.

time. They also converted the temporary paddocks into more permanent ones, which allowed them to focus on the cattle and keeping on top of the grass.

"The ranch evolved over 30 years. We started with 10 paddocks of 100 acres each. Now we can graze 96 paddocks if we want to. We didn't make that change overnight," says Vance.

While the transition was manageable, it wasn't without challenges. Vance was in his mid-30s and running a feedstore full-time after a career where he dabbled in oil and gas, then banking and real estate. Steve, six years younger than Vance, served in the Marines during the Gulf War before starting a career as a firefighter in Austin. Their strong commitment to family kept them involved over the years and eventually brought them both back to the ranch full-time.

"We try to keep it family," Vance says. "Our goal here is not only to make a profit but to keep the ranch as long as we can for the continuing generations."

Regenerative management has certainly been a family wide commitment for the Mitchells. Vance attributes much of the ranch's success to early learning from Stan Parsons. Vance's parents were among Stan's first pupils, attending Ranching for Profit in 1985. Vance and Steve have both attended the school three times over the course of their ranching careers.

"The most important thing we learned about was rest. You have to create a system to limit grazing exposure. Start by creating enough paddocks to give the pasture adequate rest. The next priority is water availability. You need to create a system that has enough water points to support your paddocks. Finally, you need to decrease your overhead," Vance explains.

*[Left] Cows, calves and a snowy egret coexist in harmony on an emerald-green, tidal lowland pasture of lush salt grasses at Mitchell Cattle Company. [Top] In 2019, Vance Mitchell and grandson Brady sit and let the cattle come to them as they visit about conformation, calmness, etc. [Bottom] In May 2023, Brady and Vance talk at the squeeze chute while working yearling heifers.*





"Controlling overhead is crucial to maintaining profit, and regenerative grazing has to be profitable, or no one is going to do it."

Even after 40 years of using rotational grazing practices, Vance still takes advantage of opportunities to learn more. Vance had known about Noble Research Institute for many years, so he jumped on the opportunity to attend an educational course on the fundamentals of regenerative ranching in Ardmore, Oklahoma, last year. The class was a nice refresher, and Vance enjoyed the opportunity to engage with like-minded folks.

"[The Noble course] really reinforced what we've been doing successfully on the ranch. It also reminded me of a few things we need to start doing again, like soil and forage tests," says Vance.

Today, Vance and Steve successfully run a 500-Beefmaster-cow herd. Though their primary revenue is the cow/calf operation, the team also retains stocker calves, depending on moisture and the market. In a good year, they will also run a heifer-development program on the side.

The brothers, along with one ranch hand, Jesse, move cows continuously. The two locations are split into 48 and 30 permanent paddocks, doubling and tripling that with temporary fencing if necessary. Movement depends on moisture, and by extension, how the pasture responds, so it varies from every half-day to every

three days. The goal is to "eliminate the second bite," Vance recalls, citing one of Parson's core principles. ('Eliminate the second bite' is a widely adopted regenerative principle that says cattle should only take one bite from each clump of grass in the paddock, which leaves enough plant matter to stimulate root growth and maintain ground cover.)

Practicing regenerative grazing has provided benefits beyond simply increasing stocking rates. The cattle became calmer. The soil became richer.

**"The only time we've fed hay in the last 30 years was once during the 2011 drought, and we won't make that mistake again."**

—VANCE MITCHELL

The grass became more manageable, and the pests were nearly eliminated. In an area where an oncoming mosquito sounds like a crop duster, Vance laughs, because when his vet calls, it's to tell him he won't be buying wormer for another year.

"People don't believe we don't have parasite problems.

But if you don't come back to a pasture for 45 days, and you let the grass get tall enough, it's just the way it works," he says. "We take fecal samples regularly and have since we started. It's not that we don't have parasites, we just let nature take its course, and we rarely have to intervene."

To Vance, regenerative grazing means matching nature with what you do. To achieve a more holistic approach, Vance often steps outside the norm of practices in his region.



A family of deer stands on alert at the edge of a shaded woodland near Mitchell Cattle Company in Lolita, Texas.



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"The extension service has had four or five show-and-tells out here. People show up real curious." Vance pauses with an exasperated laugh. "But none of them believe what we do. They just can't fathom doing this the way we do it. Moving cows every day doesn't make sense to them. What we do is not very accepted."

One major difference is that the Mitchells calve in July while most of their neighbors calve in January. This has reduced labor and inputs, as the cows are fat and ready when going into calving.

"The only time we've fed hay in the last 30 years was once during the 2011 drought, and we won't make that mistake again," Vance says. "The cows just don't need anything else when getting ready to calve." The regional deer rut is in September/October, and they turn bulls out on October 1st. "If that's when nature is going to do its breeding, then why don't we?"

It's easy to wonder whether Vance's ancestors foresaw a future where he, Steve and Janet would be working to restore their land to the natural state it was in when the family settled years ago. By mimicking nature rather than fighting it, Vance and Steve get to relax and enjoy watching the cattle. Janet is still involved with recordkeeping.

"My mother, Janet, is now 89 years old. She still does the books and keeps her thumb on my brother and I. Steve is 60 and I'm 66," Vance says.

"We would never go back to set stocking, because it doesn't make any sense at all. We could lease our land for farming, and the money would be about the same. But we enjoy this much more. As my brother and I say, our backsides don't fit tractors anymore," he chuckles, with one of those jolly laughs that makes you grin. "Everyone thinks rotating cattle is hard, but it's easy, and it doesn't take much time."

By focusing on infrastructure to support their management practices, Vance and Steve have built a system that makes regenerative grazing easy, resulting in calm cattle, low-input routines and an economical ranch that is fun for the family to manage. 🌱

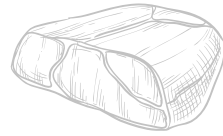
# FROM PASTURE TO PLATE

THE JOURNEY OF LOCALLY GROWN, HEALTHY MEAT into retail stores isn't an easy one, but it's one that is bringing physical and financial health to its producers, retailers and consumers.

BY TARA LYNN THOMPSON



Meat for the slow-smoked barbecue at Heritage Butchery & BBQ in Denison, Texas, is sourced locally from ranchers whom owner Pete Gonzales knows personally.



**B**randon Hix ordered the chopped brisket sandwich with a side of fries. He found a table inside Heritage Butchery & BBQ restaurant off Highway 75 in Denison, Texas, and sat with the floor-to-ceiling windows streaming in brilliant white light over his right shoulder.

In a few minutes the food arrived, carrying with it an appetizing aroma capable of making every hungry head turn. Hot, tender shredded beef had been piled high in the center of the hamburger buns. Hix poured a thick, pungent sauce over the bulk of the meat.

"What's the sauce you're putting on that?" I set the voice recorder on the table between us.

"It's just a barbecue sauce." Hix patted the bun back on top. "I hope it's good. I already put it on there." He took a bite, and his eyes, the same blue of that big Texas sky outside, gave his approval. "Yeah, it's good. Smokey."

This wasn't a special lunch, just a typical Thursday in the life of a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officer with 11 mouths to feed every night. When he finishes his sandwich, he'll head to a nearby school to pick up his kids. Then he'll head home, back to his afternoon responsibilities, then his evening responsibilities, and finally to bed, only to wake in the morning to do it all over again.

His family is no different than the majority of families in America. In all the

doings and goings of life, he wants them safe, happy and healthy, which is dependent on the quality of the food supply he can afford.

"When we first realized we wanted to eat cleaner meat," said Hix, enthusiastically diving into his sandwich now, "it was difficult financially because you're obviously going to pay a little more."

At the time his family made this eating shift, locally raised, hormone-free, rotationally grazed, grass-finished meat wasn't easy to find. But they had to find it anyway. His wife was suffering from food allergies. He was suffering from lethargy. His kids — 4, 8, 9, 12, and a teenager — needed clean food that would contribute to their growth, not inhibit it. And that didn't account for the



*It's all samples and smiles as customers order lunch at Heritage Butchery & BBQ in Denison, Texas.*



Diners at Heritage Butchery & BBQ know everything from the burgers to the pulled-pork sandwiches comes from local ranches using humane practices and healthy soil principles.

The butchery at Heritage Butchery & BBQ gets busy ahead of the lunch rush. Owner Pete Gonzales says he tries to use every part of the animal in some way, whether it's rendered fat or house-made bologna.



needs of the other people living in and out of the Hix home, like their two foster children, a grown niece, and his sister and her four kids.

Everyone needed cleaner, healthier meat options. And they needed to be local. And easy to access. And somewhat convenient. And fit their budget.

It wasn't a want; it was a need. This had to happen. But how was that even possible?

#### DEMAND CREATES SUPPLY

**P**ete Gonzales can feel the emotions every animal on his table experienced in their lifetime. Literally. He can feel them.

Even after they've been processed, even chilled and on his butcher slab in a 40-degree room, even then, he knows how the ranchers cared for their livestock. It's in the tough or tight fibers, and the blood spots, and fat percentage.

It's all there. All under his hands.

Gonzales stands to the right of the cutting table armed with only his apron and his professional butcher knives. Then the ballet begins. Each cut is precise. Every part of that animal is used.

"We try to use every part of the animal. Any of the fat we pull off, we set aside and render. Instead of using butter on our bread, we use beef tallow that we've rendered down," says Gonzales, giving an example of how his restaurant and butchery work together. "Another thing we like to do is make our own bologna. We make our own hams, utilizing the full animal and its full aspects."

As a full carcass butchery, he's bringing the old-school classic cuts — like the seven-bone chuck roast — back to dinner time. But that's not the only thing that makes him unique. Gonzalez is bringing the best of the best, the clean meats from animals raised on healthy soil principles, to his consumers.

"We take extra care," says Gonzales, mentioning the time he spends creating

what he calls a "better mouth feel" for his customers. "And our ranchers take extra care."

He opened Heritage Butchery & BBQ in November 2022, as a way to meet a need: connecting locally raised regenerative meats to discerning consumers. Whether they seek these clean meat sources to support the environment, support the local ranches, or support their health, like the Hix family, his typical customers are dissatisfied with the selections offered by mass supermarkets. They want to put a face and name to the person raising their food supply, which is one reason Gonzalez has informative wall displays that tell about the ranches that supply his restaurant and butchery.

"I want you to know where your beef is coming from. I want you to know that rancher," says Gonzales, nodding to the wall displays. "That's why we have pictures and names of the ranch on our walls. There's Noble's right there." He motions to the wall near the soda foundation and then the one at the entrance.

"When you walk in, you've got Freedom Acres. We're not hiding anything. We want you to know where things are coming from, where you're getting your beef."

#### THE INTIMATE RANCHER/CONSUMER RELATIONSHIP



The meat in Brandon Hix's shredded brisket sandwich came from Hartley Ranch in north-central Texas. The eggs in the butchery shop come from Chuck Trowbridge's Prairie Farmstead in nearby Sherman. If Hix had ordered the pulled pork, the meat would have been from Prairie Farmstead or Matt Cadman's Shady Grove Ranch in Jefferson, Texas. If Hix had purchased lamb from the butcher shop, it would have come from the regenerative fields of Noble's Red River Ranch near Burneyville, Oklahoma.

Heritage Butchery & BBQ restaurant creates a clean line from the pasture to the plate for consumers. They know exactly where the meat came from, who raised it, where they raised it, how they raised it, instead of reading generic labels at the supermarket that may or may not accurately represent the product.

**"I want you to know where your beef is coming from. I want you to know that rancher. That's really what drove this whole concept."**

—PETE GONZALES

"That's really what drove this whole concept," says Gonzales, referring to the motivation behind his butchery and restaurant. "Why are we getting our beef from just anyone? Or from places we don't know? Here, I have a relationship with all my ranchers. If I want to see them, I go see them. I can call them up and say, 'Hey, I've got customers that want to visit your ranch. Can we come out next week?' And they say, 'One hundred percent, yes. Bring them.'"

Customers not only know where their meat comes from, they can see how those animals react to the rancher. This not only speaks to the care those

animals receive, but it also gives insight to the quality and flavor of the meat, once harvested.

"When you step out of that truck, you want to see how these animals react to the rancher to know how they're taking care of them," says Gonzales, who seeks out quality in every stage of food production to guarantee that tender "mouth feel." "When the rancher pulls up, I want the cows to come greet them. I want them to be happy to see them. I want them to be able to walk up and the animals don't get in defense mode, which tells me there's some negative things going on."

#### QUALITY TASTES BEST



Not every Heritage consumer needs to meet the rancher face-to-face. Some simply come because the food tastes better, but many, like Hix, have transitioned to healthy eating and will never go back.

"It feels good to know that I'm feeding my family clean meat. I didn't realize how important that would be until we started doing it. Now I know I'm giving my kids the best diet." 🌱



At left, cuts of local regeneratively raised beef are on display in a butcher case at Heritage Butchery & BBQ. At right, market customers shop for meat, eggs and other items labeled with names of the local farm or ranch of origin.



Matt Cadman works late in the day on his Shady Grove Ranch, stringing temporary fence to make paddocks for his cattle and other grazing animals.



# WHERE'S TO YOUR HEALTH

**MATT CADMAN OF SHADY GROVE RANCH** understands why more and more Americans are seeking locally raised, grass-fed, hormone-free meat sources for their health. He's been there. To death's door and back. What followed changed his life and the life of his community.

BY TARA LYNN THOMPSON

**M**att Cadman walks his Texas fields wearing a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, standard boots and worn jeans over his long, long, seriously long legs. He has the look of a Tim Burton character — all limbs and a big, toothy smile. His 6'5", 160-pound frame stands like a tall stalk of wheat, if he ever stands still at all.

Instead, he's always on the move, both physically and verbally. His Bluetooth earpiece is part of his everyday uniform because, while he's rotating herds, wrapping silage, building coops, testing soil or hunting boar, he's got calls to make and podcasts to hear.

Matt wouldn't stand stationary if you tied him to a tree. He'd find a way to uproot the tree and take it with him. He's got 130 to 200 head of cattle to manage and rotationally graze, along with 100 pigs, 9,000 broiler chickens, up to 250 turkeys, and 600 layers that produce enough for the Cadmans to sell 35 dozen eggs, every day, 365 days a year. His customers at his 250-acre Shady Grove Ranch in Jefferson, Texas, are counting on his life-giving products and limitless supply of jokes. Slowing down isn't his speed.

So, it's impossible to imagine Matt lying in a hospital bed and slowly fading away. But he's been there. Twice. And he has no intention of



returning. He and his wife changed everything to keep Matt alive, and their fight for his health is now making the health fight for their customers possible, too.

It all started in October 2004 when two young engineering students at LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas, fell in love after a mishap at a fountain. They faced death together, and changed their entire future and the future of their community in fewer than 10 years.

That was one epic fountain mishap.

### MAN MAKES PLANS, AND GOD LAUGHS

**J**erica Cadman says she and Matt were only friends in college, at first. Matt had other plans, which went into action

one day during a fateful trip to Arkansas.

"We went to Hot Springs on a camping trip with our dorm floors, and there was this beautiful fountain in downtown," recalls Jerica, her colorful glasses

falling slightly on her freckled nose.

She is the quieter, shorter counterpart to Matt's bigger-than-life-and-limb personality. She's sitting inside the Shady Grove grocery store that is stocked with healthy options on the shelves, fresh eggs in the refrigerator and fresh meat in the freezer, which she spent the morning organizing and refilling. Outside, their five children are playing in the yard or taking care of ranch business, depending on their age. Cadman baby No. 6 is currently resting in her belly and set to arrive in four months.

"We took this group picture, and then everyone climbed down and jumped over the water," she smiles easily,

**"When we met, I knew he had this quirky little disease called ulcerative colitis. I couldn't pronounce it for a long time."**

—JERICA CADMAN

remembering how it all began. "I thought it looked pretty fun and easy, so I called out to Matt (I called him Cadman back then). I said, 'Hey Cadman, catch me.' And he said, 'What? I can't do that.' Anyway, I didn't quite make the jump across. We got all wet. Everyone was laughing. It was a big fiasco."

Later that night, Matt roasted her shoe over a campfire to dry it out, and they became good friends. Within six months, they were officially dating. Six months

more, they were engaged.

"When we met, I knew he had this quirky little disease called ulcerative colitis. I couldn't pronounce it for a long time."



The children of Matt and Jerica Cadman work with Bobbi Cadman to process eggs from their rotationally raised, pastured chickens in a refrigerated trailer connected to their on-farm store.



One of the Cadman children checks and cleans a feeder in the open-air broiler house in a pasture on Shady Grove Ranch.

"Ulcer colitis?" It did sound quirky.

"Ulcerative. Like ulcer," she explains, stopping to calmly tell her kiddos who could be in what part of the ranch until she was finished. "I knew he had that, and the extent of the effect it had on him was that he couldn't eat fruit peels, like apple. He had to peel them before he could eat them. And he couldn't eat lettuce. He had to be careful about fresh vegetables and things. But other than that, it was okay."

At that point in their courting, everything was still going according to plan. Matt graduated and took a job at General Dynamics making communication satellite antennas for the government. Jerica was in her sophomore year with plans to be an engineering materials professor. And Matt's illness could be easily handled with some simple food avoidance.

Their future looked hopeful.

In August 2005, Matt spent every dollar he possessed - minus one - to fly Jerica back to that fountain in downtown Hot Springs on a chartered four-seater prop plane, courtesy of the LeTourneau flight program, to propose.

"With one dollar," she laughs, "I accepted his proposal."

It was August, and everything was going according to plan. By September, it wouldn't be.

### THE FIGHT OF A LIFETIME

**A** month later, things took a turn. Matt could no longer manage his quirky little illness by avoiding certain foods anymore. He ended up in the hospital, losing weight faster than he could find a way to joke about it. In less than two weeks, he lost 40 pounds and needed 4 pints of blood. He was going down and going down fast.

"By Day 12, I weighed 120 pounds and looked like a concentration camp survivor," says Matt, sitting on the porch of his grocery store with his ever-present energy coming out in the speed he rocked his chair. "All you want to do is sleep, because you've lost so much blood you can't transport oxygen around your body anymore. Whenever you eat, everything starts contracting and you start bleeding. So you don't want to eat, and then you get skinnier. Then you do eat, and you get even skinnier."

The medications weren't working. The treatments failed. The doctor gave him only one option.

"My doctor comes in, and I ask him, 'So, how's it looking?' He said, 'It's not looking too good, is it?' And I said, 'Nope.' I ask him, 'Are we thinking about surgery?' He says, 'Looks that way.' I ask, 'What kind?' And he said, 'Total colectomy.'"

"How old are you at this point?" I ask, sitting across from him and not attempting to meet his rocking chair speed.

"23. Maybe 22. A total colectomy is the entire removal of the colon. So you defecate through a little pouch strapped to your side for the rest of your life." He took a beat to let the weight of the memory return. "That was probably the lowest day of my life."

That night, he saw no one but Jerica, his fiancée. They prayed "the hardest prayer of my life at that point," and he came to a peace that, if this glorified God, then so be it. That's what he wanted.

On the day of his scheduled surgery,

Matt had just finished reading through Job (specifically, chapter 42, where God restores Job's health) when a new doctor he'd never met walks in.

"He looks at my charts and says, 'Oh, looks like you're doing better. Maybe we'll release you today,'" says Matt, who had prepared himself mentally for surgery that day but was, instead, going home. "I couldn't believe it. I weighed 120 pounds, felt like trash, and left the hospital."

Slowly, Matt recovered. Six months later, he'd regained his weight and married his sweetheart. He stayed on his diet. He took his meds. He ended up in the hospital again, anyway.

Again, he lost 40 pounds. Again, he needed blood transfusions. There had to be a better solution.

"They tell you, 'There's nothing you can do to prevent it. There's nothing you can do to cure it. You've just got to keep it in remission as often as you can through medication,' which, back then, was \$800 a month," says Matt, who proved them all wrong.

## WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WAY

**T**he first solution the Cadmans found was grass-fed beef. And they found it by accident. A young couple moving off campus needed to sell a freezer full of it. The Cadmans decided to give it a try.

The game changed.

Not only did they love the flavor, but Matt responded well. They needed more of it, along with other food products raised naturally, without hormones, in the sunlight and rotated on fields for maximum nutrition from healthier soil.

But they couldn't find them all in one place. They purchased grass-fed beef from one ranch, pasture-raised chicken from another, pasture-raised pork from yet another (if it could be found at all), and ditto raw milk and pasture-raised eggs with the deep-orange yolks.

Getting groceries required strategy, planning and travel and, still, the supplies weren't steady.

In the meantime, as Matt's health continued to improve, he and Jerica's passion to help others with

autoimmune diseases or other health struggles grew. He decided to make a professional change and return to school to become a gastroenterologist, but a rude awakening had him changing professions again.

"I talked to professors and people in the medical field and, looking at the research," says Matt, accepting that the help he wanted to provide people wouldn't come through the medical profession, "I realized the medical field doesn't want a non-drug solution."

By all appearances, he wasn't wrong.

"I've been medication-free and virtually symptom-free for 13 years. I had the worst case of ulcerative colitis I've ever heard of ... and I haven't had a single doctor come and ask me what I did."

The Cadmans realized, if they needed these clean food sources, others did,

too. So, the engineers became ranchers.

"We don't use synthetic anything," says Matt, who understands personally why this is so important to his customers. It's important for him, too. "We don't use any synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, fungicides. Jerica made a shirt that said, 'We don't take CIDES.'"

Instead, they work with nature, like using what grasses and forbs are already present,

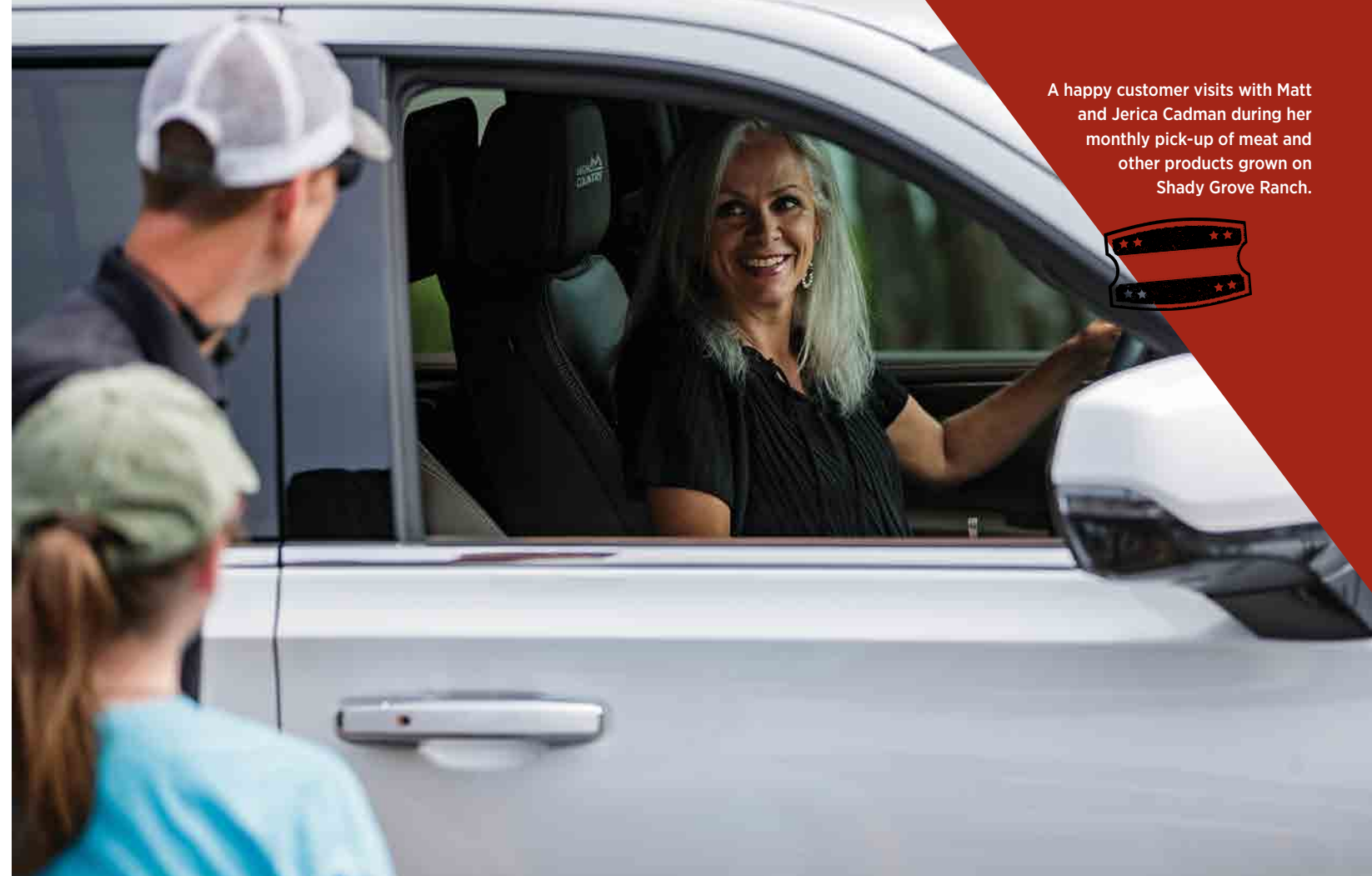
even if not growing.

"The seed bank is already there; it simply needs fertility. And you get fertility by not just spreading out manure too thin. It's high concentrations of it, and fast-moving," he says. "I mean, that's what regenerative is. It's high density of animals and fast movement."

It makes all the difference, for his family and the ones he serves.

**"We don't use synthetic anything. We don't use any synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, fungicides."**

—MATT CADMAN



A happy customer visits with Matt and Jerica Cadman during her monthly pick-up of meat and other products grown on Shady Grove Ranch.



Shady Grove Ranch is home not only to grass-fed cattle but also heritage-breed pork, turkeys and chickens, all raised on pastures using totally rotational management.

## REACHING THE CONSUMER

**M**ary Ann Brandon pulls up in her white Chevy Tahoe to Good Shepherd Reformed Episcopal Church on a Thursday morning in Tyler, Texas. She comes every month to pick up her Shady Grove Ranch order of pork, chicken and bacon — which she says is, of course, also pork, but deserves its own mention. Sometimes her order also includes flour, butter, bread and tea. Most months, she spends around \$250 per order, except in months she is stocking her freezer. Then it doubles.

"Since I'm not raising my own food, I want to know it's coming directly from someone that I know and trust, and they're doing it the way I want," says Brandon, who has always been health-conscious and growing more so as she ages. "It was attractive to me that (the Cadmans) launched into this journey because of some health problems they were having and have seen great success."

While Brandon pulls up in the line, Matt

is busy pivoting between loading boxes of his product from his refrigerated van into customers' cars and cracking jokes on the fly with his customers or his wife.

The Cadmans travel from their Jefferson ranch to Tyler on the first Thursday of every month for their drop-off at Good Shepherd church, one of four of their drop-off locations in four cities. On the third Thursday, the drop-off is in Longview in the morning and in Marshall by noon. Every month, they're at Calvary Baptist Academy in Shreveport, Louisiana, to meet their customers across state lines.

"We want to sell at least \$8,000 worth of product at those drops," says Matt. "It doesn't always happen, but sometimes it goes way more, too."

Once they're finished, the Good Shepherd parking lot empties and the Cadmans head to Granary Foods on Front Street in East Tyler, one of seven grocery stores that carry Shady Grove meat products. There, Matt chats with Wynn Worthen, the store manager, like they're old friends, because they are. Then he's back on the road again to load up 700 chickens at the ranch and

head to the processor.

Part of Matt's success is definitely due to his energy level and evident love of life.

"He wants to conquer the world and is convinced that he can do it," says Jerica. "So, it's like, okay, we'll just tag along."

However, the other part of Matt's success is a smart, simple selling strategy: he believes in diverse income streams. That is why Shady Grove has multiple-city drop-offs, grocery stores, the ranch store, and wholesale butchery shops, like Heritage Butchery & BBQ Restaurant in Denison, a new, old-school butcher shop that only processes the full carcass.

Ultimately, it's about using every possible, successful avenue to get his products into the hands of his consumers so they can find the answers he did.

"We've been married for 17 years, and I think I finally figured something out about Matt," says Jerica. "I think the reason he is the way he is is because he almost died ... he loves life. He just grabs on to it."

"He's just alive," I confirmed.

She agreed. "He is just so alive." 🌿

# THE GREEN GRASS OF HOME

**FROM THE SANDS OF IRAQ TO THE PASTURES OF MICHIGAN,** an Iraq War veteran's heart for service is now regenerating the soil.

**N** BY RACHEL GABEL

ick Rodgers stood in his high school history class and watched the coverage of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. He remembers his shock and anger watching history unfold in front of him. He remembers in the days following, how, he says, we were great Americans for a while, waving flags and coming together despite differences.

He tried to sign up for the U.S. Army the next day. A few plates and screws in his arm from rodeoing — bull riding and bull fighting — slowed the process. A junior in high school at the time of the attacks, Rodgers dropped out of school to earn his GED certificate, eager to leave Michigan and be part of a mission. He was stationed at Fort Drum, New York, and then deployed to Baghdad in 2005, with orders to monitor checkpoints and patrol the northwest corner of the city.

He learned years later that the college located within the perimeter of his patrol was an agricultural college. He recalls seeing irrigation and row crops around the Tigris River and abundant sheep and goat production, with goat and mutton the animal protein of choice in the area.

When he finished his service and left Iraq for the final time, it was summer. He says seeing the green grass from the air was a relief, and it turns out that was the beginning of a regenerative journey that has always led to better grass.

*Photos by Carson Robertson*

*First-generation farmer Nick Rodgers and his wife Annie pride themselves on growing grass for their cattle and sheep using a low-input, regenerative approach.*





Annie and Nick Rodgers look over the grass-fed cattle and sheep they raise using regenerative practices on Red Leg Farms.

When he met his wife, Annie, she worked in finance and never dreamed of being involved in agriculture. She turned to selling real estate and encouraged Rodgers to take up agriculture.

He is quick to admit he didn't marry his better half, but rather his better 90%.

When the couple began raising cattle, they had a 3-acre lot with a few dairy-breed cows and a handful of Black Baldies. He would turn them out on pasture during the day and lock them up at night. His goal was a cattle-feeding operation, but the cost of building from the ground up was out of reach.

An answer came in 2019 when he stumbled across the 2016 documentary "One Hundred Thousand Beating Hearts." Rodgers listened as Will Harris, a Bluffton, Georgia, rancher, described the days when he would calculate how many pounds of beef he could squeeze out of his existing herd and available resources. Rodgers understood exactly what Harris meant.

Harris then says the calculations no longer cross his mind; the thoughts were

**The proof that Rodgers' decisions were good ones was in the dry years, when neighbors pared down their cattle numbers by as much as half. They would drive past Red Leg Farms, where waist-deep grass undulated in an ocean of what Rodgers calls "putting-green pastures."**

replaced by wondering how he could improve the grass and cattle in his care.

Lying in bed one Saturday night, the couple watched a video about manure. Rodgers admits this may not have been quite so momentous an occasion for

someone less absorbed in soil health and grass-growing. It may not have even been the exact moment he realized he found his purpose again.

But Rodgers says the breath of relief that he breathed in that moment rivaled the one he once exhaled at cruising at 30,000 feet. Annie's idea – soon joined the couple's handful of existing cattle, and the operation grew from 3 acres to its current rented and deeded 147 acres, becoming Red Leg Farms near Montrose, Michigan. (The farm's name is a nod to his time in the Army as an artilleryman, or a Red Leg.) Katahdin hair sheep complemented the cattle's grazing habits, and the farm has steadily grown through heifer retention, new purchases and the unparalleled support, he says, of his wife.

At first, the sheep grazed on the poor-quality pasture he had. These days, he says, those pastures are nearly too good for sheep.

There is thoughtful design in his livestock pasture movements and intention in his decisions. The purpose in his

life that once eluded him now covers him. His neighbors slow and watch as they drive past his ranch; they see Rodgers moving cattle daily, sometimes more often. The daily moves were somehow both similar to and wildly different from his former daily patrols in uniform.

The proof that Rodgers' decisions were good ones was in the dry years, when neighbors pared down their cattle numbers by as much as half. They would drive past Red Leg Farms, where waist-deep grass undulated in the ocean of what Rodgers calls "putting-green pastures" around him.

The contrasts across fence lines don't lie, and neither do the neighbors who have since asked Rodgers for his grazing secrets.

He recently hosted a pasture walk in partnership with local extension agents and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Nearly 20 farms were represented, with herds ranging from three cows to 300. Beginning farmers showed up and counted on Rodgers to guide and teach them; satisfaction topped off the cup once filled with discontent.

The customers for their grass-fed meat run the gamut, which reflects how consumers respond to Rodgers' natural approach to production. When he answers his phone or welcomes a visitor to the farm, it could be a beginning farmer or a local dairy farming family wanting grass-fed beef or lamb like they ate growing up. It could be an executive chef interested in serving meat produced on Red Leg Farms, or perhaps a former vegan whose only animal protein is grass-fed lamb Rodgers has raised.

This year, Rodgers drew up a new grazing plan – one which still relies on the regenerative techniques and low-input style he has come to be known for. Then he threw it in the trash. It was replaced not by other techniques, but by a grazing plan he says is working better than the one he penned himself.

This plan was written by his youngest son, who at 15 years old is interested in agriculture. The local school doesn't have an FFA program, but Rodgers continues to learn from podcasts, documentaries and other regenerative farmers, an opportunity his son will have if belly-deep grass continues to call to him. Until then, he'll continue to teach and follow his own path to better grass. 🌱



Katahdin hair sheep on Red Leg Farms, near Montrose, Michigan.

#### ADDING VALUE

## How to find and capitalize on niche markets for your regenerative products

#### AT ITS MOST BASIC, THERE ARE TWO WAYS TO BE MORE PROFITABLE:

cut costs or increase the value of the commodity being sold. If an operation can accomplish both, that's ideal. In the case of Red Leg Farms, they have found a niche market and have increased the value of their product, grass-fed beef and lamb.

Capitalizing on a niche market is key, and with consumers seeking out farm-to-plate sources for their food, it was a prime time to fill that desire.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Present an organized and clear telling of the story behind the product. Consumers want to know where their food comes from, and also want to know the farmers and ranchers raising it. Sell the story and back it up with facts about the management practices.
- Use social media to reach outside the immediate area if selling online makes sense for your particular operation.
- Farmers markets and similar venues can allow local businesses to showcase their products and themselves, and allow consumers interested in products raised through farming practices they feel good about, to find them.
- Emphasize what makes the product unique. In Rodgers' case, it is meat from grass-fed Highland cattle and Katahdin sheep. Share what makes the product unique, but avoid disparaging other agricultural products in an effort to showcase your own. Negative marketing is never advised.
- Emphasize that products borne from regenerative practices utilize fewer inputs and in a way that emphasizes soil health, in turn, resulting in a healthy animal. Be willing to share information about the regenerative practices in place.
- Oftentimes, one niche won't work for every operation. Bradley suggests finding what works for the operation, and then concentrating on that. Rising to the level of regenerative agriculture practice that Rodgers has accomplished doesn't happen overnight.
- Seek out quality resources to learn more. Just as Rodgers offers educational pasture walks, he depended upon videos, podcasts, classes, and additional research to learn. Giving back to the industry that he has found success and solace in is important as well.

Finally, do not to be afraid to challenge the status quo. 🌱

# PITCHIN' IN FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

**THE INAUGURAL** Noble Research Institute cornhole tournament fundraiser raised more than \$50,000 to revitalize grazing lands.

BY KATIE MILLER



# A

fast-approaching down-pour failed to dampen the community's outpouring of support for Noble Research Institute's inaugural cornhole tournament fundraiser this summer. Even amid the inclement weather, 45 teams assembled in Ardmore, Oklahoma, on June 12 to help raise more than \$50,000 to support the revitalization of our nation's grazing lands.

Originally dubbed "Pitchin' in the Pasture," the fundraiser was supposed to be held in a pasture near the Noble Research Institute but, as the weather forecast turned more foreboding, the decision was made to move the event indoors. It was a powerful reminder of the fact that weather is an integral, and often fickle, part of a farmer's and rancher's way of life.

## PRESENTING PITCHIN' IN THE PASTURE

Now, with the event safely staged inside, it was time for the bags to fly. At the center of the tournament was charitable community leader Nabholz, which brought six enthusiastic teams to the competition as the top sponsor.

According to Justin Woolverton, Nabholz executive vice president of operations, Nabholz chose to be the presenting sponsor of the cornhole tournament because it seeks to align with organizations dedicated to community improvement through collaboration. Nabholz executives recognize that spirit in Noble, because their own company has spent 75 years operating under its mission: Grow Our People. Serve Our Clients. Build Our Communities.

While Nabholz is an innovative construction company, the last portion of its mission doesn't refer to actual buildings.

"The 'build our community' piece of that mission statement really has nothing to do with the physical buildings. It's about sharing our blessings and giving back to the places that provide for us, whether through volunteer opportunities or financial contributions," Woolverton says. "We believe in giving back to those that bless us."

As Woolverton points out, Nabholz seeks and pursues community partners, whether they're looking for clientele or philanthropic causes to support. Noble serves as both. Nabholz and the Noble Research Institute have collaborated on various construction projects for more than five years. Expanding the relationship to include a philanthropic partnership seemed a natural next step



Teams from around Oklahoma compete in the first Noble Research Institute Pitchin' in the Pasture Cornhole Tournament. (Thunderstorms meant a move indoors.)



Noble Research Institute CEO Steve Rhines, center, with Aaron Sims, left, and Colt Riddle, right, of Dollar General Distribution Company. The teammates are the 2023 champions of "Pitchin' in the Pasture," Noble's first cornhole tournament fundraiser.

and aligned with Nabholz' commitment to elevating the communities where they live and work.

"I think Noble's mission is broadly impactful. The work they do around soil and regenerative agriculture impacts everybody — everybody eats food, breathes the air and drinks water," Woolverton says. "With the ever-increasing population and the decreasing amount of available farmland the world faces, it's a very important mission."

The Noble Research Institute staff are incredibly grateful for the community's support of this event and the healthy soil movement. With generous partners, like Nabholz, interested in a sustainable future, we can transform our grazing lands and unleash the numerous benefits of healthy soil such as cleaner water, increased food security, enhanced wild-life habitat and carbon sequestration to mitigate climate variability.

"This highlights the importance of partnership," says Shannon Steele, offi-

cer of advancement operations and outreach for Noble. "What we're doing is bigger than all of us. Those partnerships are so important, because it will take everybody to make this big change."

### PLAYING AND GROWING TOGETHER

Participants of "Pitchin' in the Pasture" came as competitors and supporters but left as partners in revitalizing America's grazing lands.

Strangers upon arrival, players rubbed elbows, congratulated one another on a good shot and, most importantly, learned together how healthy soil is imperative for a more sustainable and regenerative future. This was precisely what the organizers had hoped.

"The whole point was to bring organizations together so you can share your message and demonstrate how your

**"All of these different corporations see the importance in giving back and bringing people together and making their community better. We are thankful that their generosity has expanded to include Noble and our goal of working with ranchers to improve the soil for the betterment of us all."**

—SHANNON STEELE

work affects people's daily lives," Steele says. "In the end, participants were able to share in our mission."

When the metaphorical dust cleared, the Dollar General Distribution Company team reigned supreme. Winning team members posed with custom belt buckles adorned with the "Pitchin' in the Pasture" insignia. Once the winning photos were taken and the milling crowd began to thin, Steele reflected on the inaugural event and what it meant to Noble's mission.

"All of these different corporations see the importance in giving back and bringing people together and making their community better," she says. "We are thankful that their generosity has expanded to include Noble and our goal of working with ranchers to improve the soil for the betterment of us all."

### SEE YOU NEXT YEAR

Hoping to build on the success of the inaugural event, the advancement team has already begun working on the second annual cornhole tournament. First on the list, exploring ways to make the event even more collaborative and creative.

Simultaneously, enthusiasm for the event continues in the community and sponsors have already started to reach out about next year's event.

According to Woolverton, Nabholz served as the presenting sponsor this year because Noble manages the funds they raise with integrity.

"We look for nonprofits that we believe are good stewards of their donors' money, operate with a high level of integrity and are truly making an impact in the communities where we work and live," he says.

In addition to honoring the generosity of our philanthropic partners, Noble seeks to provide a relaxed, meaningful and enjoyable experience for event sponsors and participants. While they laugh and compete, they can play a role in furthering Noble's mission to improve the health of the soil and support the ranchers that steward it.

"Agriculture is present in our daily lives," Steele says. "It's not just food; it's fiber, your clothes, everything. Agriculture literally touches everything and everyone." 🌱



Above, cornhole tournament competitors react after their tosses. Below, form and focus at work during Noble's cornhole tournament fundraiser event.



## IN THE KITCHEN

# Grilled Venison Skewers

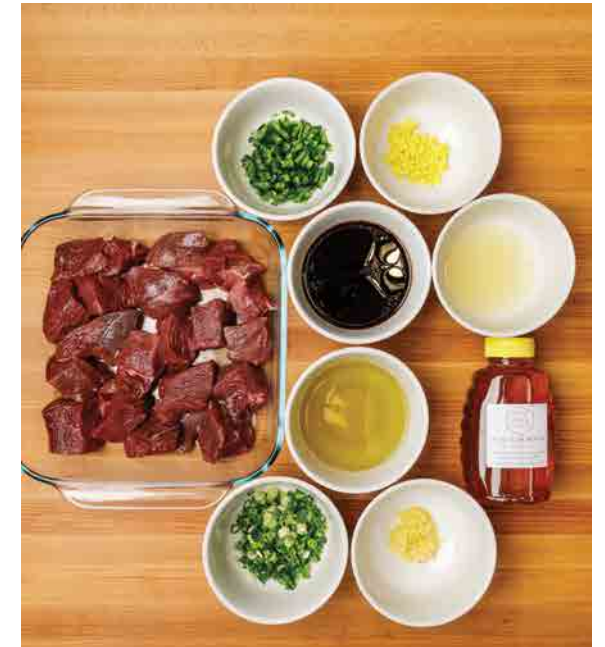
**TRY THIS TASTY** and colorful way to serve up your deer harvest or the gift of venison from a generous friend.

## INGREDIENTS AND SUPPLIES:

- ½ cup soy sauce
- ½ cup olive oil
- 1-3 teaspoons minced ginger
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice (1 whole lemon)
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 2-4 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 green onions, chopped
- 1-3 jalapeños, chopped (optional)
- 1-2 pounds venison meat, cut into about 2-inch cubes (or duck, dove or other wild game if preferred)
- Red bell peppers - diced in 1- to 2-inch pieces
- Onions - diced in 1- to 2-inch pieces
- Cherry tomatoes, left whole
- Zucchini - cut in half moons ½-inch thick
- Wooden or metal skewers
- Salt and pepper (optional)

5  
HOURS  
(including  
marinade)

4-6  
SERVINGS



## INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Mix the soy sauce, oil, ginger, lemon juice, honey, garlic, green onions and jalapeños in a bowl.
2. Add the cubed venison and stir to coat.
3. Marinate in the refrigerator for 4 hours or longer.
4. Drain and discard the marinade.
5. Assemble skewers by alternating the venison and vegetables.
6. Grill over medium-to-high heat; stopping at medium is best so venison doesn't dry out.
7. Serve with your favorite side dish. 🍴



## ◀ WILD COOKIN' WITH WILL

This recipe comes from Noble Research Institute ag consultant Will Moseley, an adventurer in the woods and in the kitchen, who cooks up the wild game he hunts.

▶ Marinated venison and fresh vegetables stack up to delicious grilled skewers with Will Moseley's recipe.





Earthworms improve soil structure, water movement, nutrient cycling and plant growth.

### HANDS-ON COURSE

Learn more about counting earthworms and other ways to measure soil health by taking the *Essentials of Regenerative Ranching* course offered by Noble Research Institute. You'll find more about the course by scanning the code below.



### IN THE FIELD

# Big digger: The mighty earthworm

**TRACKING THIS SMALL BUT MIGHTY DECOMPOSER** can help you monitor your soil's regenerative journey.

**B**elow your pastures is a living and breathing ecosystem. One that is interconnected with the plants above, vital to your operation, but sometimes overlooked. With the right measurements and a few household items, you easily can track the progress of your soil's regenerative journey. In comes the hero of this DIY ... this big digger with a small stature: the earthworm.

Earthworms aid in soil biology, water infiltration and mitigating soil erosion by creating pathways for roots and water to travel. A good target number is 10 earthworms per cubic foot of soil. Tracking the number of earthworms you have over time will help you see verifiable results of improvements to your soil health.

Here's how to do an earthworm count for a quick look at your soil health. Best times to dig are late spring or early summer.

### MATERIALS:

- Pencil
- Ruler or tape measure
- Clipboard
- Buckets
- Shovel
- Tally counter



### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Dig a hole in your pasture 1 foot wide by 1 foot long by 1 foot deep. If you're unable to dig the full depth, record your depth to be able to calculate the number of worms into the number per cubic foot.
2. Using GPS on your smartphone, mark the general location where you dug so that you know to dig in a different spot the next year.
3. Place all the soil into buckets or large containers. You may complete the final count at any point during the day, so feel free to transport the container back to your shop or house.
4. Carefully sort through the soil by hand, breaking it into small enough pieces that you can count all earthworms present.
5. Tally the earthworms as you find them.
6. Record the number of earthworms per cubic foot of soil for that field so you can compare your counts over time. 🌱

## BEFORE YOU GO

# 3 Tips for Marketing Regeneratively Raised Beef

BY KAYLA JENNINGS

**M**ore and more consumers want to buy beef that has been raised in a sustainable way, and they are willing to pay for it. This affects everyone in the beef industry, from the producer to the final beef supplier.

Ranchers applying regenerative practices on their ranch are at an advantage to capture these emerging premiums while also ensuring their ranch is sustainable for generations to come.

A proponent of these practices, Robert Wells, joined the Noble Research Institute as a livestock consultant in 2005. He has seen regenerative principles and practices offer value to producers time and time again.

He says the value is not solely seen in extra money made, but also in money saved. Here are a few tips he offers for ranchers who want to maximize value in their regeneratively raised calves and finished cattle.

### 1. RECOGNIZE VALUE TO YOUR RANCH AND AT MARKET

As Wells often reminds ranchers, payments come to producers in many forms.

“One is the actual-dollar cash payment for the purchase of that animal,” he says. “But we have to remember there are aspects of regenerative that are less easily quantifiable”

Over time, the soil gets healthier, the forage gets more nutritious and the carrying capacity of the land should increase, while at the same

time inputs decrease, saving money.

Beyond these savings, there are opportunities for ranchers to receive premiums in the marketplace. Today, a rancher can capture value in different ways depending on their herd size.

“The main thing is finding a venue where your animals are going to get recognized for the value-added traits you built,” he says.

By going to a venue where other producers are marketing cattle raised under the same stipulations, ranchers have more opportunity for value.

These marketing alliances with other like-minded producers offer more potential for profit. Working with an order buyer securing a truckload of cattle all raised with the same value-added characteristics offers a higher likelihood of a premium.

### 2. FIND BEST DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER MARKETING OUTLET FOR YOU

If a rancher decides to market directly to the consumer, Wells recommends starting small.

“There is more work involved in marketing this way,” he says. “You have to find the customer, and you have to cultivate that customer. You can convey the story that goes along with the cattle to a customer who finds value in those animals.”

Often, marketing directly to the consumer means the cattle are delivered to the processor, and the consumer picks up the processed beef. Some producers sell at traditional farmer’s markets. While these



are popular options for selling direct, Wells says they are not the only way to gain extra value from beef sales.

Companies like ButcherBox and Barn2Door offer producers a platform to market their beef product to consumers seeking beef harvested from regenerative operations.

“Those are the two largest formats out there that allow a producer to have a venue online to direct-sell to the customer,” he describes.

More and more, local restaurants or meat markets are seeking cattle raised with a holistic mindset. One limiting factor in this marketing choice is a rancher’s ability to provide a consistent supply of beef to a retailer. The rancher’s supply must match the demand of the marketing outlet.

Retail grocery chains, like Whole Foods or Sprouts, can also be an option for smaller producers, since their meat buyer likely will be able to source cattle from enough different ranches to meet their demand.

### 3. KEEP GOOD RECORDS AND TELL YOUR STORY

Wells says keeping good records and telling the story are two key components to finding marketing success.

“We’re not only marketing the calf, we’re marketing everything we’ve done for that calf as we’ve gone through the process,” he says. “And that means we’ve got to have records.”

In fact, a third-party verification of the management claims a rancher makes is often required by marketing outlets. In some cases, this means an on-farm visit by an auditor representing the buyer. Consumers want validation that the claims of regenerative practices are true.

Today, many customers demand a full history. Keeping records goes hand-in-hand with telling the ranch’s story.

“Highlight the advantages of what you are doing to make your product special,” he says. “Highlight those things that set your cattle and ranch apart from others, without being negative” about other operations.

The beef industry is all on the same team, so marketing beef as a high-quality protein before pointing out the disadvantages of differing management strategies benefits the entire industry. Specifically for those managing regeneratively, Wells says some points to emphasize would be talking about how the cattle live on a ranch their entire lives and play a role in enhancing the health of the land.

Wells encourages producers to continue their good work toward soil health as part of their operation, because more premiums are on the way.

“There will be numerous programs developed to help producers capture value for their cattle being raised regeneratively,” he says. 🌱

# SOIL:

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**Just like every acre matters, so does every gift.**



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## **HEALTHY MISSION**

*Matt Cadman, of Shady Grove Ranch in Jefferson, Texas, moves his grass-fed cattle he raises with no hormones or "cides" to a new grazing paddock as sundown approaches. Read his story on page 30.*