

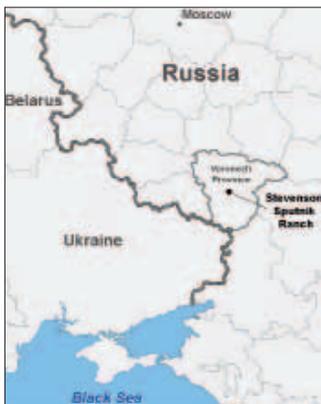
Ranching in Russia

Cattle export opportunities take off with Sputnik Ranch.

Story & photos by **Ron Zellar**, Montana Department of Agriculture



► Montana cowboy Matt Graveley helps tend Angus cows and calves at the Stevenson Sputnik Ranch south of Moscow in February 2011.



► Locator map shows ranch location between Moscow and the Black Sea in southwestern Russia.

Darrell Stevenson knew it would take more than rugged Montana cowboys, horses and cattle to create a ranching way of life in Russia, and the Hobson-area Angus breeder figures he's made a good start. Russian youth might help show the way.

A lack of worker passion after years of collective farming in the old Soviet Union was among the challenges Stevenson faced in 2010 when he and two Russian partners launched Stevenson Sputnik Ranch, a breeding operation they hope will populate cattle ranches throughout the

country. Needing a way to showcase the ranch's pedigreed stock led Stevenson to hire two young sisters, about the age of his daughter, from the nearby village of Shestakovo.

Kids in Montana grow up showing livestock at county fairs, practically living with their animals, Stevenson says, so why not try the same thing in southwestern Russia. He taught the girls, ages 11 and 14, how to halter, lead, bathe and care for the selected calves, and took the sisters to the Golden Autumn Moscow livestock exhibition, the country's premier show.

The young women did well, by all accounts. At one point, a crush of spectators caused one of the animals to "freeze." When other tactics didn't work, one of the sisters "whispered in the calf's ear and that got it moving again. It was so cute. They loved it at the show," says Marty Earnheart, livestock marketing specialist for the Montana Department of Agriculture.

"You should have seen their grandmother," Stevenson says. "She was just beaming."

Growing market

There were skeptics at first, but the Montana ranching community is seeing the value of the ranch, which is 11 time zones east of Montana in the Voronezh region of Russia, about 340 miles south of Moscow. Through Stevenson's efforts, with help from people like Valier Hereford breeder Jack Holden, at least 44 Montana seedstock producers have sold live cattle to Russia and Kazakhstan since the fall of 2010.

The numbers are escalating. An initial 1,434 registered Angus and Herefords shipped to the ranch in 2010; another 2,000 head shipped to Voronezh and 2,000 head shipped to Kazakhstan in 2011; and new orders are pending for 4,500 breeding stock at three locations, including Siberia, in 2012.

"This is an opportunity, in my particular case the opportunity of a lifetime. But it's also a great opportunity for Montana," says Stevenson, who is 42.

Sales of live cattle, semen and embryos from Montana during the last 18 months exceed \$20 million. He estimates another \$750,000 in

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► A crate holding five heifers is loaded onto a Boeing 747 Russian AirBridge Cargo plane at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

benefits to Montana businesses from sales of supplies and services that include cattle chutes, saddles, automatic head-restraint gates, veterinary care and vaccines.

Stevenson first met Sergey Goncharov, a Russian investor, at the Denver livestock show in 2006. A year later, the two and another investor met during a Montana trade mission to Moscow and discussed becoming partners.

State support

Governor Brian Schweitzer, himself a farmer and rancher, believes that Montana has the best beef genetics in the world and that opening doors to new markets for those genetics is a good thing for the industry and state. Governor Schweitzer suggested Montana target Russia as a likely market for Montana's world-renowned beef genetics. Agriculture Director Ron de Yong led the 2007 delegation, which included Stevenson, Holden and Earnheart, who as the department's livestock marketing specialist has worked extensively with the project.

"This kind of agriculture investment and diversification is a win for Montana," said Governor Schweitzer. "Sputnik Ranch is able to showcase Montana beef genetics to a whole new market."

Most of the cattle have been transported by airfreight, loaded on Boeing 747s in Chicago. O'Hare International Airport credits the shipments with launching a new business relationship with AirBridge Cargo Airlines. The Russian carrier, the nation's largest, now advertises climate-controlled airfreight from O'Hare to Moscow, Europe and Asia.

Stevenson says he has received excellent support from Russian authorities, who see the breeding operation as a key ingredient in their aim to be self-sufficient in beef, and from locals who welcome the income.

"Shestakovo is a Third World community in some respects, although now you see businesses calculating the tab with an abacus while talking on a cell phone," Stevenson says.

If you doubt that Montana cattle are king in Russia, he says, consider that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin owns 40 head of Angus that will be impregnated this year with semen from ORigen, a genetic services company near Billings.

Some hurdles

Building a quality beef industry from scratch has not been smooth sailing. During the first live cattle shipment, rough seas battered a cargo vessel carrying 550 bred cattle and the people trying to care for them.

"There were 30- to 40-foot waves that threw us around pretty good," says Craig Moore, a Choteau veterinarian who was on the voyage. "The hardest part was we weren't able to clean up after the cows for days at a time." After one storm, Moore says, the cattle looked like they'd been through a washer filled with manure.

Larger than the transportation hurdles was the almost total lack of ranch knowledge and infrastructure in Russia, which last had a thriving beef industry during the time of the czars 100 years ago. Under communism, the Soviet Union concentrated on dairy, and the main source of beef was incidental to milk production.

In the ranch's first winter, calving in the February cold and snow was accomplished by a few hand-selected Montana cowboys and by Russian cowboys in training who had never witnessed such an operation. The resulting failures to communicate were colorfully described by Ryan Bell, a cowboy journalist from Ennis, in a series of magazine articles titled "Comrade Cowboy," published in *Western Horseman*.

"It was difficult because you were trying to teach a skill and execute the job at the same time in adverse circumstances," Bell says.



PHOTO COURTESY AUDREY RUDAKOV

► Sisters Jenya (left) and Nastia Rukinova of Shestakovo, Russia, pose with animals they trained and Sputnik Ranch partner Darrell Stevenson of Montana.

Language differences were an issue, with a bilingual Russian veterinarian named Katya Zimina trying to soften the barbs and bridge the communication gaps.

"Language only goes so far. The cowboy way of learning things is by watching anyway," Bell says. "It doesn't take much language when you pull a calf to say, 'Grab this rope and pull.' The hard thing to learn is that you can't just stop. You can't sit around and have a five-person cigarette break."

Winter calving is common in Montana, where the goals are to take full advantage of available grass and ship larger calves for fattening and slaughter in time for the summer backyard grilling season. Without an established pattern in Russia, the Stevenson Sputnik Ranch has decided to abandon the Montana cycle in favor of delivering calves on grass in April and May. (Although often associated with satellites, sputnik means "traveling companion" in Russian.)

From the start, the investors indicated they wanted more than cattle. Establishing a pilot ranch made sense, particularly for pedigreed cattle that will be monitored for traits such as efficiency, meat quality and their ability to thrive. During the Cold War, several countries sold livestock to the Soviet Union, but often with no follow-up and with inadequate preparation to sustain an industry, Stevenson says.

After some negotiating, the partners agreed to create Stevenson Sputnik Ranch and to emphasize world-class, registered Angus and Hereford breeds. The decision to go with pedigreed animals was not so much for prestige as for predictability, according to Stevenson.

Equine quandary

A small disagreement among the partners involved horses. Russia has a rich history with horses that dates back thousands of years and includes Orientals, Arabians, thoroughbreds and work breeds. What Russia lacks is an American Quarter Horse bred with instincts for working cattle, Stevenson says. Experience with five Quarter Horses that traveled with the first livestock shipment encouraged the ranch to add seven more in 2011.

Whatever problems there have been pale compared to the possibilities, Stevenson says. The market for quality animals and genetics is exploding. The ranch at Voronezh started a little more than a year ago with 1,434 registered cows and bulls. Next summer, the ranch will artificially inseminate 8,000 cows with semen from ORigen.

As the world's population continues to grow, there are concerns about how new mouths will be fed. "Experienced Montana cowboys and new Russian cowboys will be part of the solution," says Schweitzer.



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