

While some used boats to move about the flooded Payette River valley in January 1997, Mike Lettunich and his crew relied on horses. In places the horses had to swim, yet the water still was up to the riders' chests.

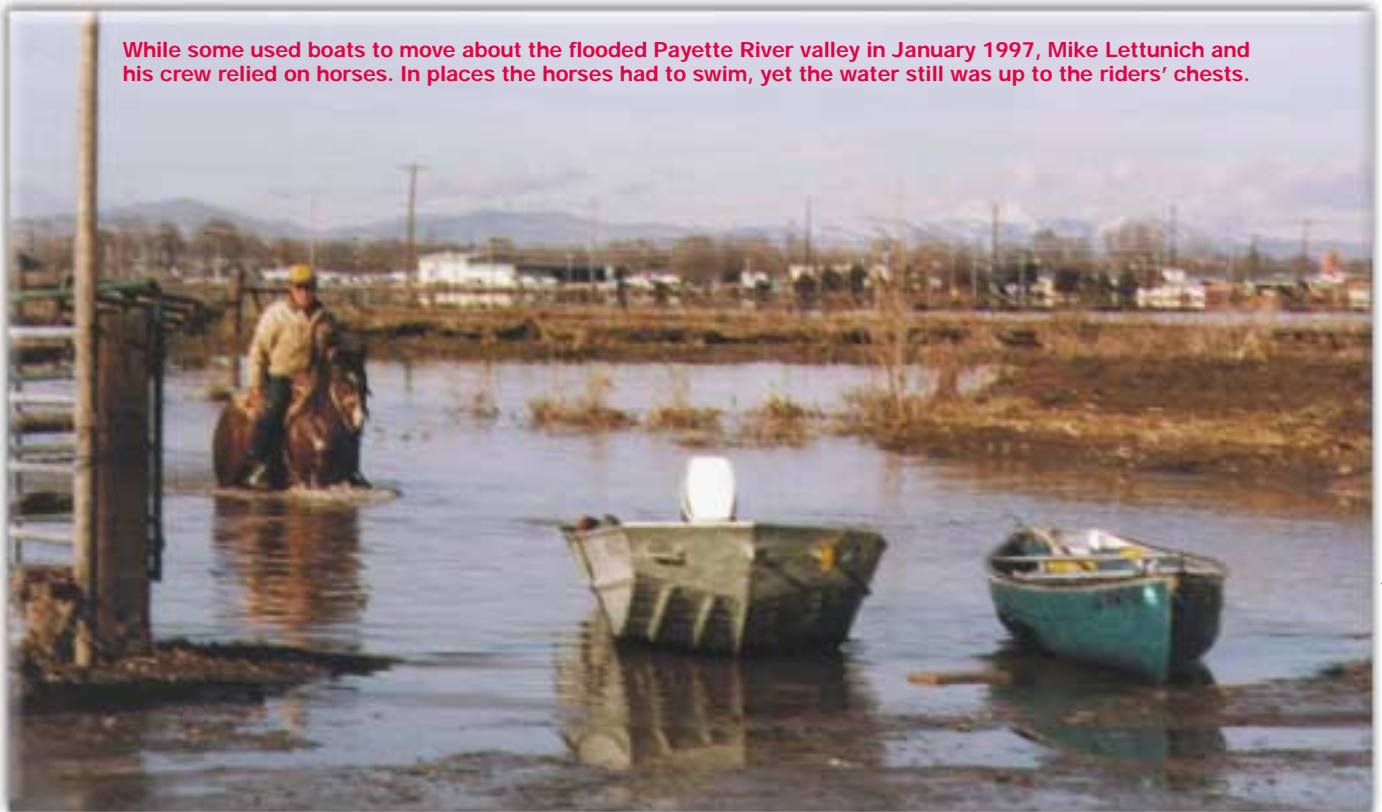


PHOTO COURTESY MIKE & RENEE LETTUNICH

Too Much, Too Soon

Time and distance may have separated the floods experienced by Greenestar Angus and Lettunich & Sons Ranch, but both operations saw plans for the future eroded by the sweeping currents.

BY BRAD PARKER



here's certainly one thing more devastating for farmers and ranchers than not getting enough precipitation.

That's getting too much of it.

Although the potential for flooding is easy to recognize, guessing the severity compares to picking the World Series champion about 10 years in advance. Judging how much water there will be, where it will go, and how fast it will get there always leaves room for doubt.

And just when you think you've got a grasp on the situation, Mother Nature throws her curveball. That's the lesson learned by two Angus operations.

Two hurricanes

The depth finder in the small fishing boat indicated 13 feet of water. Unfortunately the vessel wasn't carrying fishermen across a lake. The crewmen were pork producers drifting above the farm gate on the way to their hog barn.

A week before, three-fourths of a mile of dry land lay between that gate and Contentnea Creek. That was before hurricanes Dennis and Floyd drenched the coastal plains of North Carolina in September 1999. The creek swelled from its usual width of 90 feet to almost 1½ miles. The hogs weren't

the only inhabitants of the farm. About 110 head of Angus cattle belonging to Joel Harrison's family were grazing there. The rented pasture contained nearly all of Greenestar Angus' spring-calving cows and their January- and February-born calves, along with a young herd bull, purchased recently.

Hurricane Dennis made two passes early in the month, dropping 10 inches of rain. Hurricane Floyd hit the coast on the morning of Thursday, Sept. 9, after two days of rain. In all, Floyd added another 23 inches.

By Thursday afternoon the sun was shining, and the early flooding had

subsided by evening. During the night the water rose again, preventing Harrison from crossing the bridge between his home in Kinston and the farm near Snow Hill. The hog-farm managers, however, were able to drive onto the farm that morning.

"There was some water around, but they thought everything was fine," Harrison recalls. "They left there Friday thinking that we were in pretty good shape."

When Harrison still couldn't cross the creek Saturday morning, he called the hog managers to ask them to check his cattle. That's when he learned the water had risen overnight, calling the fishing boat into service.



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"It was an hourly thing. The water rose, from Friday morning to Saturday morning, 12 to 15 feet," the area native and hurricane veteran says. "Nobody had ever seen anything like it."

To make matters worse, another 10 inches of rain fell the next week — making for 42 inches in the first 20 days of September. It was the 21st, a Tuesday, before Harrison could cross the bridge to Snow Hill. On the farm, water was still waist-deep. He had to wait until the next day to begin walking the property in search of his cattle.

Four cows and a calf were all he found that first day of searching. Luckily, all were alive. But they were the sole survivors.

The next day Harrison found the remains of nine of his animals. He never saw the other 96. Apparently the cows, 600-weight calves and the young bull were swept away by the current.

Along with the animals, the Harrisons lost 400 round hay bales and 3,500 bushels of oats. They estimate their total losses to be between \$120,000 and \$150,000. An entire calf crop

was essentially lost, but that was the extent of it since the flooded property wasn't their own.

"Once you knew that they were gone and lost, it was just time to deal with the loss," Harrison says.

A river unleashed

At daybreak on Jan. 2, 1997, the crew at Lettunich & Sons Ranch began moving cattle to the east side of U.S. Highway 95, which splits the 1,000-acre spread near Payette, Idaho. The night before, the sheriff's department had warned them the Payette River was rising and the levy system was sure to fail, likely flooding the valley west of the four-lane highway.

A blanket of snow had covered the mountain tops and valley floors in southwest Idaho early that winter. When several warm rains moved through the area, the snow began to melt about five months earlier than normal.

Mike Lettunich and his brother Ed have raised Angus cattle along the Payette since 1969. Mike says they always watched the river, which splits the ranch west of the highway

yet again, assuming any flood waters would follow the river's course.

That was the wrong assumption three years ago. "It did not break where we thought it would," Lettunich explains. "It broke behind us."

The river had spilled over the levy farther upstream, before it passed under the highway. The road then acted as a dam and caused the water to collect on the "wrong" side. That left the Lettuniches' homes and the cattle and hay they'd just moved standing in 3½ feet of water.

Their stock had to be driven on horseback to the ranch's highest points. In places the animals had to swim, yet the water still was up to the riders' chests. Some animals were loaded in trailers and taken to neighbors' pastures.

Both homes, the barn, the sale facility and the ranch office were in water for a week. Mike and his wife, Renée, left their house on the evening of Jan. 2 and stayed at the home of the ranch's livestock manager for 5½ months.

The Lettuniches lost 410 tons

of hay that had been purchased at \$70/ton. It had to be replaced at \$100/ton. Almost 5 miles of fence were destroyed, along with some catch pens and six irrigation pumps. Several of the ranch's vehicles and other machinery were damaged by the floodwaters.

"I don't know how else to say it but *devastated*," Lettunich says, describing the ranch's condition.

Long recovery

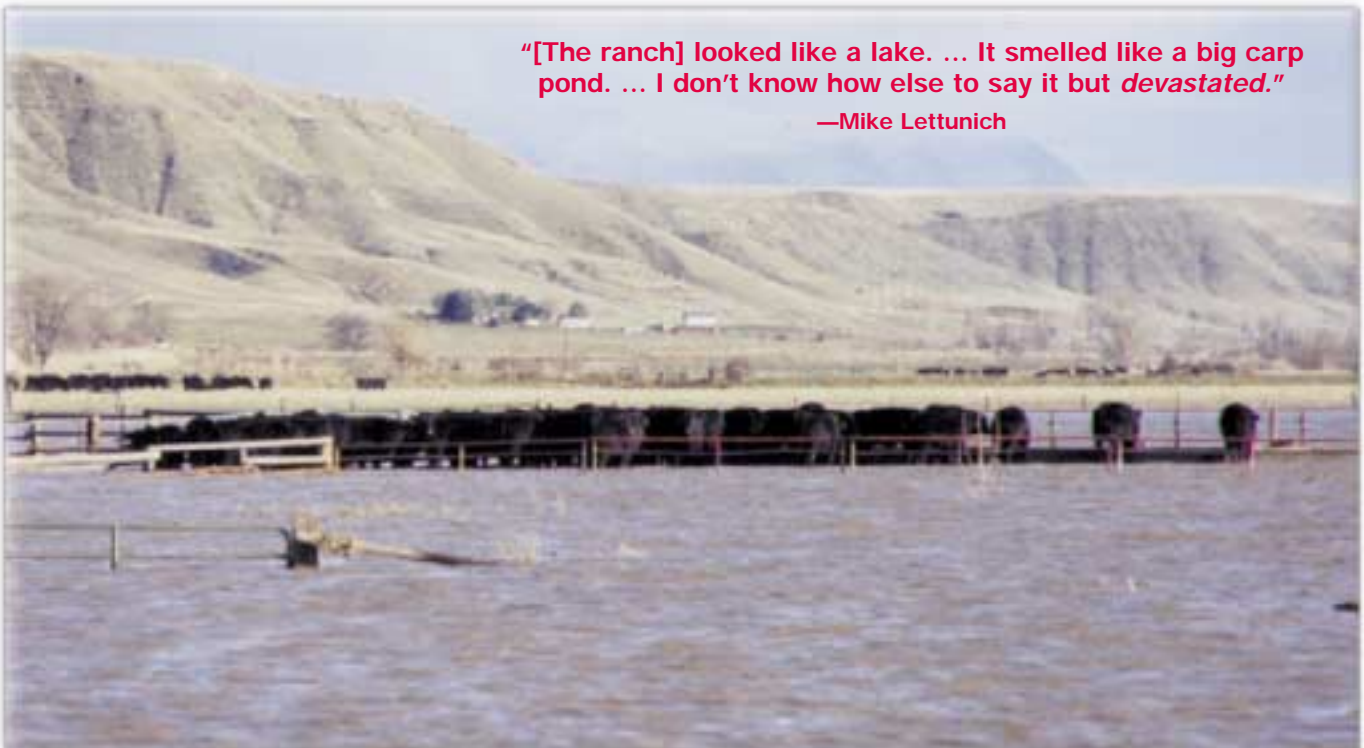
Because the family's own property was flooded, the Lettuniches incurred heavier losses and had more cleaning up to do than the Harrisons.

Mike says the first order of business was to repair the feedyard so they would have a place for the weaned cattle — the ones moved from along the river to the east side of the highway, which turned out to be a futile effort. "Actually, the water almost got higher on that side than on the side with the river," he admits.

As if the stress of repairing or replacing their homes and the ranch facilities weren't enough,

"[The ranch] looked like a lake. ... It smelled like a big carp pond. ... I don't know how else to say it but *devastated*."

—Mike Lettunich



PHOTOS COURTESY ARGUS OBSERVER, ONTARIO, ORE.

another disaster struck at the heart of the Angus and Brangus operation in the wake of the flood.

Some of the cattle moved to neighbors' pastures included 550 of the ranch's 700 pregnant females. The expectant mothers were hauled 4 miles to a 1,000-acre pasture enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

With some effort from Idaho's senators, the federal government granted permission to put pregnant females on the set-aside acres, but that was all. The Lettuniches hesitated because the property lacked loading and calving facilities, but they agreed.

The cattle did well there for two weeks. The grass hadn't been touched in almost a decade as part of CRP, so it was belly-high and lush. There was a downside, however, in what else the pasture offered.

The landowner had been dumping culled onions on alkali spots about the property. No one thought anything of it because feedlots in the area used onions to cheapen their rations. What they didn't know was that those rations never include more than 15% onion.

Beyond that, some cattle will become addicted to the vegetable and will refuse to eat anything else. With so many animals in the pasture, it was hard to keep track of which ones were frequenting the onion piles. It soon became painfully obvious.

Lettunich says some of the cows became anemic and too weak to move. Their equilibrium was affected. With their being on the verge of calving, the stress of moving them would have been fatal. The only course of action was to check them day and night.

The Lettunich crew pulled 36 dead calves, yet 10 of the cows died anyway. About 90 more died with their calves still inside them. Of the live calves born,



Both Mike's and Ed's homes, the barn, the sale facility and the ranch office were in water for a week. The Lettuniches lost 410 tons of hay, 5 miles of fence, six irrigation pumps and more.

around 45 died before they were 3 days old. Still another 25 females died later that fall due to internal damages.

The total loss due to the onion poisoning, in terms of abortions and dead cows and calves, equaled almost 300 head.

They carried alfalfa hay to that pasture for a month in attempts to increase the cattle's vitamin-A intake, and mineral blocks were seemingly everywhere. The irony, Lettunich explains, is that the females were taken there to avoid having to provide supplements.

"If the onion thing hadn't of been there, it would have been a good deal," he says of the CRP exemption, adding they were lucky they hadn't taken any heifers to the pasture. To add insult to injury, however, the levies held for the rest of the season, so those cows really didn't need to be moved. More proof that you can't outguess Mother Nature.

It took almost six months to return to their normal routine. To this day, the ranch is rebuilding through its breeding program because the flood damage left them without the financial resources to buy replacements.

Lettunich says their total losses (homes, equipment, facilities, feed and animals) were between \$750,000 and \$1 million.

The aftermath

Although there were significant differences in their situations, the Harrisons and the Lettuniches discovered common themes in the aftermath.

For one, both found themselves altering their marketing plans.

Greenestar Angus had scheduled a total-liquidation sale for October 1999, but the storm caused them to reschedule for April 2000. "This wasn't the cause of the decision [to sell]; it just prolonged it for six months," Harrison explains. Then he adds with a chuckle, "And we just have less cattle to sell."

He says that, looking back, October would have been a tough time to sell cattle anyway due to the agricultural economy. With hopes that spring will bring green grass, optimism and higher cattle prices, he says, "It could have been a blessing in disguise."

Lettunich & Sons, too, has had to adjust their plans. For 10

years they conducted production sales on the ranch each November and March, but they canceled the last couple of fall sales due to their lowered herd numbers.

Both operations also discovered the shortcomings in government disaster assistance.

While Lettunich & Sons mainly relied on financial help from their local bank, the Small Business Administration (SBA) provided a loan to help repair the houses. About \$60,000 in federal disaster aid also came their way to help offset lost facilities, equipment, feed and livestock.

"They basically gave you just a commercial price. It wasn't a registered price," Lettunich says of the government's formula to calculate livestock reimbursements. "When you have registered livestock, you're devastation is just worse because the government tries to replace them for X amount on how much they weigh. They don't consider the foundation cattle."

The Idaho cattleman says it was difficult trying to convince the government that a 12-year-old cow was a valuable animal. "If she hadn't of been working,

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she would have been in McDonald's or Burger King years ago," he tries to explain.

Harrison, on the other hand, said so far there's been no government assistance for this year's hurricane losses. "There's been a lot promised, but nothing delivered," he says.

He's applied for disaster relief from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and SBA, but because he didn't lose his home, he isn't expecting much. The biggest disappointment, he says, was in the uncooperative attitude of the Farm Service Agency (FSA) in restructuring a loan when their cattle were lost. Thankfully, his local bank has stepped in to help.

Harrison was impressed, though, with the concern from his friends in the Angus business. He received calls from across the country from folks willing to send hay or feed or to help look for cattle. "It was encouraging just to hear from them, wanting to do anything to help," he says. "There just wasn't anything to do."

Lettunich also found a support network among his Angus associates. In the months following the Idaho flood, he says he received a lot of advice from those he met at shows and sales. Hearing about the experiences of breeders from along the Mississippi River was especially helpful, he says.

Friends in the Payette area were also a godsend to the Lettuniches during the recovery. "When you go through a deal like this, you find out who your true friends are," Mike says. "They'd just show up, wearing grubby clothes, ready to help you. Those people I'll never forget."

How can you prepare?

Both Harrison and Lettunich say the hardest part of dealing with the floods was the unpredictability.

In North Carolina no one expected it to rise so much so quickly. "In all the flooding that we had ever had, we never had anything even come close to this," Harrison says of what has been termed a "500-year" flood. He just kept hoping his cattle would show up somewhere, but eventually the reality took hold.

In Idaho the path of the flood was the surprise, Lettunich says. "We never thought that it would break behind us and then have the highway basically be a dam," he admits.

Both say it would have been impossible to prepare for the devastation, and they don't see anything they can do differently for the future.

"We'd seen natural disasters before," Harrison says. "I don't know what you do to prepare for a 500-year flood."

Lettunich says the only thing that would have helped their situation was to have had more culverts under Highway 95 to let the water pass back to the west side. "We would never have had the backup of the water to the extent that we had. It would have relieved a lot of the damage," he explains.

Unfortunately, funding isn't available to make those changes.

Both men emphasized that it could have been worse, and it was for many of their neighbors.

"Ours was over pretty quick. You adjust to that and go on," Harrison says. Other hurricane victims weren't so lucky, he explains. In late November some people still had their belongings outside and were trying to dry out their homes. "We had a house to come to; those people are still suffering."

Lettunich notes the situation was similar in south Payette, where some residents lost everything. "Mother Nature can be tough, and you can't prepare for her," he says.



Mind Game

Rebuilding after a natural disaster includes putting the emotional pieces back in place.

During and after a natural disaster, emotions like fear, shock, anger and sadness take hold, says Elaine Johannes, Extension specialist in human development and prevention in Kansas State University's Office of Community Health. She explains these are the first of several phases of emotional recovery following a natural disaster.

Sometimes, she says, there is a tendency to transfer the anger into blame. "It's really hard for people to realize that natural disasters just happen; it's not that someone or something is to blame," she explains.

Next, the *heroic phase* begins, Johannes says. People go to extraordinary lengths to find help and solutions. These efforts are followed by the *honeymoon phase*, a period of intense goodwill within the community.

Eventually reality sets in during the *disillusionment phase* when people may become outspoken about their situations and start blaming others again. Johannes says this is when the most moral support is required. Once those emotions are resolved, the *reconstruction phase* begins. This is a never-ending process of re-evaluating life in light of the natural disaster.

Anniversaries of the event will continue to present emotional challenges. "Be it a week after the disaster, a month, a year or years after, the anniversaries of the natural disaster are important," she says. At these times, sadness over the losses needs to be transferred into celebrations of what's been accomplished since.

There is no standard time line for the emotional recovery process, but if the stress is still preventing someone from getting into a normal routine six weeks later, more support may be required, Johannes suggests.

To make matters more difficult, the emotional recovery coincides with the claims processes associated with recovery assistance. Johannes says this flood of red tape is often termed the "second disaster."

She suggests the first step in dealing with the stress is preparation. She advises people to learn from others' experiences. Next, she reminds them to be accepting of others and their situations.

Through it all, Johannes says, it's important for disaster victims to stay healthy. Proper diet and sleep habits are vital, as is using caution with alcohol and medications. Remember that stress often causes people to form or to revive bad habits.

She advises people to be prepared for the "second disaster" and to keep things in perspective by asking themselves what they are learning from the process. Finally, keep the lines of communication open with trusted advisors, such as clergy, disaster-relief workers, friends and relatives.

"If we internalize all that emotion, it's probably going to take away the energy we need to cope with all the extra work we'll have to do," she explains.

When children are involved, it's important to include them, but filter information so they aren't burdened by things they won't comprehend. Johannes says providing communication outlets, such as playing, drawing or singing, will help children come to their own understanding of the situation.

She adds children should return to their normal schedules as soon as possible, and six weeks is a proper readjustment period for them, too.

Most importantly, children lack experience with such events, so they'll model adults' behavior; therefore, adults should be careful how they respond to things during the emotional recovery process, especially when around children.

"It's scary for kids to realize adults are not always in control," Johannes says.

Those wanting to help after a natural disaster should offer concrete forms of assistance because the victims will be too overwhelmed to think of things for which to ask.

The best forms of assistance are those that empower the victims to function independently again. Johannes says to share resources and information, then gradually pull back to avoid overdependency. Most importantly, be prepared to help again during the "second disaster" and anniversaries.

—Brad Parker