GOLDEN Grazing

Nestled between a golf course and miniature mansions lies Bruin Ranch, an ecological powerhouse in the cow-calf industry. This Auburn, Calif., operation puts a new twist on the phrase "Business Breed."

by Lindsay King

Deep in the heart of gold-rush country, a herd of black Angus pairs silently combats the growing tinder box that is northeastern California. It's a tricky balance, but to put it simply — land comes first, followed closely by cattle.

"If we aren't managing our ecosystem processes and the environment in which our cattle run, then we don't have anything," says Bruin Ranch Manager Joe Fischer, whose family homesteaded just south of the area back in the 1860s.

When everyone else was buying equipment and animals, Fischer's great-grandfather had his eyes set squarely on land. He strongly believed that if you take care of the land, it will take care of you.

Fischer holds this generational wisdom close as he navigates the evolving landscape of cattle-ranching in the Golden State.

From the ground, up

A strong foundation in any endeavor ensures a favorable outcome, and the same holds true for cattle inputs. It all formulates well below the soil.

"If there is a healthy root system in place, that allows the cycling within the soil — with all the different microbes — to take place," says Roger Ingram, farm advisor emeritus for the University of California Cooperative Extension. "Bruin Ranch grazes cattle in a way that there is still protection for the soil."

In other words, no pasture on the Bruin Ranch is grazed to the ground.

Ingram was Fischer's ecological mentor for Bruin Ranch for 15 years. Ingram officially retired and assumed an emeritus role two years ago, handing

the reins over to Dan Macon who is a livestock and natural resources advisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension.

With variable precipitation, raising grass and cattle in Placer County means protecting the soil from sun, wind and runoff.

"Keeping that blanket of forage over the soil allows the rain to soak in rather than just run off," Ingram says.

It's more than rotational grazing; it's listening to the environment. The inaudible conversation doesn't come naturally to Fischer or his ecological consultants. It's taken years of small-scale tests and research to fine-tune their grazing system.

"Maintaining organic matter in the soil helps it hold on to the water that's there longer," Macon says. "I think it creates more resiliency in those pasture systems."

A group self-dubbed "The Grazing Geeks" serve not only as accountability partners, but also as advisors for each other in the area.

"It's just some ranchers, myself included, that get together at each other's places and take a look at what each one has going on," Macon says. "We can look at their specific situation and give our feedback on what they might do to improve it."

What meets the eye

The annual grasses covering the rangeland aren't actually native to California. When the Spanish settled the area in the 1700s, they didn't just bring livestock. Seeds discreetly harbored in clothing and transit transformed the state almost overnight.

"Most of our annual rangeland is dominated by introduced annuals that have now naturalized and been here for 300 years," Macon says.

Bruin Ranch is still home to some of the remnant perennial grasses native to the state — mostly purple needlegrass. It's the type of grass that isn't at the top of the menu, but it comes in handy when it's the only thing standing during a drought year. Of

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When Joe Fischer first started as manager of Bruin Ranch, his goal was to maximize his grazing days on the property and manage as many head as possible. He quickly realized this Auburn, Calif., operation wasn't going to take kindly to that type of treatment without some sophisticated strategizing.

"I finally figured out that we are actually farmers at rest and the more rest we can give our pastures, the more we will get rewarded for it in the future," Fischer says.

He's been trying to develop an economic model to show the financial value for a pasture at rest.

The 18 head carrying capacity during the summer months on the ranch were spread out in the pastures when Fischer took the reins. Today he can run as many as 50 head just on the 40 acres of irrigated land located at the ranch headquarters.

This is the site of their micro test plots for their ever-evolving management techniques.

"It's all about matching the recovery rate to the grass, which is a lot easier to say than actually do," says Dan Macon, livestock and natural resources advisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension. "There's some research the University is conducting just north of here that suggests rest during the growing season — November through April — actually increases the carrying capacity of the land by at least 30%."

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course, that's not all these leading ladies are foraging on out here.

"We'll have some broadleaf plants, clovers, sub clover or rose clover and filaree," Macon says. "On the annual rangeland the clover holds on to its nutritional value longer into the season, so it's a good plan to try to manage for."

And manage they do; Fischer and his team have an intricate rotational grazing system that utilizes every inch of the roughly 4,000 available acres at the headquarters and about 3,000 acres of other leased ground. The irrigated pastures also hold secrets of non-bloating legumes — bird's foot trefoil.

As a result, Fischer is raising what he calls "browsers."

"Our cattle get driven into a paddock in the fall and just browse on a variety of forages, including brush, through the winter," Fischer says. "I'd like to think our cattle could perform just about anywhere."

Between raising a calf and foraging, the Bruin herd is expected to continuously travel in search of prime nutrients and water. It's part of their charm when it comes to utilizing their feed sources and satisfying the needs of their next owner.

Brittle environment, resilient cattle

California isn't usually associated with the term "brittle environment," but it explains the sometimes-harsh responses to weather changes from the land north of any shoreline.

"When you think of a brittle environment, you probably think of Arizona, New Mexico, places like that," Fischer says. "You might see million-acre ranches, but they don't raise a million cows."

One of Fischer's customers grazes one cow per 320 acres. Their resting period can last up to a year, meaning they actually run one cow on 640 acres.

Knowing the environment can make or break a rancher in the West. But so can understanding which breed of cattle will not only survive, but thrive.

"I can't have forage-converters that don't perform,

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— Joe Fischer

so we're constantly balancing producing as much beef as we can for the least amount of sunlight as possible," Fischer says. "Those little blades of grass are solar panels harvesting the sunlight all day long, and then our cattle convert it to protein."

Round, easy-fleshing cattle with impeccable structure are the only kind Fischer allows on the place. And for good reason, they have to really work if they want to remain on the Bruin Ranch.

"We don't mess around when it comes to foot issues," Fischer says. "We were part of some of the first foot score EPD [expected progeny difference] research conducted by the American Angus Association."

Three-hundred head on nearly 10,000 acres made the research group really work for their dinner. Originally, Fischer set out to build a program void of supplemental forage.

With the changing weather patterns in the area and diverted precipitation sources, Fischer has come to terms with the need to add some hay to the equation.

"In an ideal world I would be able to depopulate in the event of a drought," Fischer says. "But as a seedstock producer, I can't flex my numbers like that. We have to take that economic hit and just feed some extra hay when we have to."

Keeping the integrity of his herd and operation goals intact often comes at the cost of profit margins. But just like his grandfather before him, Fischer knows protecting the land is worth it.

"This ranch is largely range and forage based," Macon says. "I think that creates some unique opportunities to have cattle that fit the environment they are raised in a place that is similar to where they will go."

This is the premise of everything Fischer works for year after year. He says their landscapes are at the very least, equally as challenging as the places these cattle will go to work for his commercial customers.

"We try to stay true to our cowboy roots," Fischer says. "We want cattle that know what it means to get out and forage — cattle that work for us and not the other way around. We are providing cattle that are uniquely adapted to do the most with the least." AJ

Editor's note: Lindsay King is a freelance writer from Oklahoma City.