

Six Conservation Strategies

The Blair family shares how their commitment to conservation allows their operation to last generations.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

For more than 115 years, members of the Blair family have ranched on the native prairie north of Sturgis, S.D., adjacent to the Black Hills. Currently, brothers Ed and Rich Blair and their families raise Angus cattle and yearling stockers across 40,000 acres of deeded and leased land in Meade and Butte counties, as well as operate a backgrounding feedlot.

The Blairs credit a commitment to range management and conservation through the generations for allowing their family ranch to survive, grow and thrive.

1. “Water, water, water,” emphasizes Ed Blair as to what has helped their cow-calf operation the most. They prefer a tank on every quarter section or every corner of the pasture. They use 10-12 foot tire tanks recycled from equipment used in mining. Between their two ranches, the Blairs have installed nearly 100 miles of water pipeline and about 75 tanks. With only 15 inches of annual precipitation, Ed credits their development of water sources for allowing Blair Bros. to run more cattle and keep cattle on the range longer into fall and winter.

He also believes access to good, clean water has boosted calf weaning weights and production.

2. **Cross-fencing for rotational grazing.** Chad Blair recalls they began testing rotational grazing with a group of yearling heifers, simply moving them every week to ten days through several small pastures. That was four decades ago when he was just a child. But the Blairs were quickly sold on the regrowth and improvement to their pastures with rotational grazing, and they’ve cross-fenced all of their



Blair Brothers Angus Ranch near Sturgis, S.D., today includes the third, fourth and fifth generations of the Blair family, including Ed, his wife, Wanda, their son Chad, his wife, Mary and their three children, EC, Kate and Clara; and Rich, his wife, Jeanie, their son Britton, his wife Amanda, and their two boys, Jack and Colt.

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rangeland into pastures from a few hundred acres to 1,200 acres. The Blairs monitor the range and move their herds based on precipitation, grass growth and cattle condition. Rotational grazing has also allowed them the flexibility to avoid grazing certain pastures if sage grouse mating and nesting is occurring. Today, Chad says, “I enjoy seeing the long-term results from water development and grass management that will benefit the generations to come.”



3. Seeking better markets. Ed and Rich credit the addition of artificial insemination (AI), particularly through synchronization programs, with increasing the genetic merit of their cow herd and progeny. As a result, the bulls and females they market have high-quality genetic traits and fed cattle now have a high percentage grading Prime, which earns additional market premiums. Likewise, Ed points to Rich Blair’s 40-year career in cattle marketing, including time with CattleFax, for helping the family tap better returns. Ed says, “Learning how to market is just as important as learning how to conserve your grass.”

4. Working with partners. The Blair family has worked with numerous partners over the years to garner technical expertise as well as cost-share dollars for cross-fencing, protective hay fence to keep wildlife out, rebuilding dams, water developments and other practices.

Their list of partners includes the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), South Dakota State University (SDSU), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Sage Grouse Initiative, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, South Dakota Game Fish and Parks, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

5. Looking for ideas from others. Whether it is building a new calving barn, fencing ideas or an ag waste system, the Blairs enjoy attending industry events and field tours to glean knowledge and ideas from others. Case in point, when putting in an ag waste system for their feedlot, Ed brought home an idea for a vegetative treatment area from an Iowa tour he had attended. It had never been done before in South Dakota, but the Blairs worked with NRCS and SDSU to make it a successful reality.

6. Involving generations. Rich notes having the next generation return to the ranch — his son, Britton, and nephew, Chad, and their families — has been key. “It has allowed us to grow,” he says, and points to the Blair’s 2014 purchase of a second ranch location thirty miles north of Belle Fourche, S.D. Chad and Mary Blair live on that ranch with their three young children. “Buying that ranch allowed us to run more cows and control the development of the bulls and heifers we raise to be sold as

breeding stock,” Rich says.

As well, the Blairs are grooming their children to be stewards of the family ranch for the future. All five of the fifth generation are often out moving cows or assisting with feedlot chores.

Their mom, Mary, Chad’s wife, concludes, “It’s great to watch my husband pass on the understanding of why conservation practices are so important. As a family, sharing with the kids is building a foundation for them to have the same care and knowledge. It takes a lifetime and constant effort to keep conservation at the top of your priority list. Without healthy rangelands, the delicate balance of man and nature cannot coexist.” ^{AJ}

Editor’s note: In 2020, the Blair family was announced as South Dakota’s eleventh annual Leopold Conservation Award winner, which includes a \$10,000 cash prize.