

DROUGHT



SURVIVORS

Montana's Horse Butte Ranch is tailoring its Angus operation to handle drought.

Story & photos by *Sue Gordon*

The popular TV series "Survivor" has made a game, for viewers' entertainment, of 16 individuals living off the land. But for ranchers like Dennis and Erica Voss of Horse Butte Ranch near Two Dot, Mont., surviving off the land is a reality. Facing their fifth year of drought makes it an even more difficult challenge.

Rather than view the drought as a dire situation, Erica Voss says it has "stimulated changes" to their Montana ranch. Both Dennis and Erica say they live by the philosophy of turning problems into assets. As a result, they are altering management and marketing methods to help weather the dry conditions. This is their story.



The operation

In 1987, Dennis and Erica purchased a ranch near Two Dot and relocated there from the western part of the state, where they had been leasing land. They chose central Montana, says Erica, because it offered some of the best cattle-raising country in Montana. Currently, they have access to 16,000 deeded acres and 2,000 acres of state land. The majority of the operation is in native grasses, with about 10% of the land seeded to cool-season grasses for early grazing and about 10% in hay.

Horse Butte Ranch is situated between a mountain range to the west and the eastern Montana plains, giving them elevations ranging from 4,500 to 6,400 feet (ft.).

In the early 1900s, ranchers in the snowy Gallatin Valley area of Montana drove their cattle to the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

► **Above:** For Dennis and Erica Voss of Horse Butte Ranch near Two Dot, Mont., surviving off the land is a reality. They are facing their fifth year of drought.

Drought Survivors CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33

Two Dot region to winter because winds kept the range clear of snow, uncovering grass for winter grazing. The wind and the strong grass allow “cake (supplement) and grass outfits” to run cheaply and efficiently when managed for winter grazing and late spring calving, say Dennis and Erica.

Over the years, the Vosses built a herd of registered Angus and commercial cows. At its peak, they were running 1,000 mother cows. They have focused on building an efficient cow herd, which is currently divided into two genetic groups. One is a linebred Shoshone-influenced group. The other is based on carcass and growth traits. Both groups are founded on culling criteria that will not tolerate a lack of fertility, poor udders, poor feet or other physical or disposition problems.

During grazing, the large herd is split into smaller groups to accommodate various pasture sizes. Often, first- and second-calf heifers are run together, while older cows are managed differently.

“Our mature cows are expected to be the toughest, most aggressive ranging cows on the ranch, as ‘rangeability’ is part of our culling criteria,” Dennis says. “A cow who stays in low-elevation areas, does not take her calf too far from water, or has a moon-eyed, lazy look will be culled.”

Their selection for carcass traits has always centered on the expected progeny difference (EPD) for percent retail product (%RP), Dennis says. “The percent retail product EPD has the conceptual depth we strive for, as well as the real numbers and genetic possibilities for influencing the kind of cow we feel will work best for the Northern Plains.”

The couple’s overall

dedication to raising quality cattle was recognized in 1998 when they received the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

In addition to their Angus herd, they also raise quarter horses and have a flock of 100 sheep, which Erica describes as “a hobby.” Dennis and Erica operate the ranch by themselves and hire some contract help each spring to assist with their annual production sale.

“Ranching is our full-time occupation. Thus, the ranch has to pay for itself,” Erica says. Dennis adds, “It is an exciting and challenging goal.”

Drought decisions

But, after the drought set in five years ago, the couple realized they would be faced with some difficult decisions. With little

rain or snow for moisture, their pastures and hay fields have offered minimal forage the last couple years. This has forced them to buy supplemental feed for the herd.

“In the spring of 2000 we had no grass in the pasture to even turn the cattle out on,” Erica says. So they kept the cows in the lot, fed them supplemental feed, and bred them by artificial insemination (AI) on the natural heat cycles. When they finally had some grass to turn the herd out on, they put several cleanup bulls with the cows and then used DNA to identify sires of the calves born to natural service. They now continue to use DNA for sire identification among their calves.

After the summer of 2000, which Erica describes as “especially bleak” for available grass, the Vosses decided to reduce their herd size. In January 2001, they dispersed all of their commercial cows due to the drought. Currently, they have about 600 registered Angus and hope to maintain that herd size.

Working with nature

After selling their commercial cows, the couple also decided to make changes to their calving season. This year their mature cows began calving the last week in April. In the past, they started calving the entire herd in late February. Now, only the heifers calve at that time.

The Vosses made this decision in order to cut down on their feed bill and to work more closely with the traditions of other successful cow-calf operations around them. Their current winter feeding program works as follows:

From December through March, all cows are caked on winter range. Their cake is a pellet, custom-produced from all natural ingredients. It includes vitamin A and phosphorus and usually contains about 24% protein. It does not contain urea.



► After four years of drought, the pastures at Horse Butte Ranch offered little spring green-up and little forage.

The cake is fed from a truck-mounted dispenser that measures it precisely for each cow. "Actual caking takes on a bit of an art form in that the procedure must accommodate the cows on the low end of the pecking order as well as all the rest," Dennis says. To ensure that all cows get some cake, they do not typically cake more than 200 head in each group.

About a month prior to calving, cows are fed high-protein, green alfalfa. After calving, cows with calves are then fed prairie hay until grass is available.

"Now, we are only feeding hay to the cows about a month before they calve, rather than January through April," Erica says. "The cows aren't fat, but they are healthy; and we've saved a tremendous amount on feed and hay."

Of their new calving season, she says, "We see it now as working more with nature. There are lots of positives." She points out that April/May calving is easier because they aren't fighting wintry weather, and the calves tend to stay much healthier.

Health is indeed part of their genetic program. Over the years, Dennis and Erica have tallied observations based on a sire's ability to produce calves that stayed healthy. They've kept records on each calf that was doctored for whatever spring ailment (pneumonia, scours, etc.). Through this process, Dennis says they have identified various bloodlines and sires that definitely produce calves with low resistance to disease.

"We attribute the transmission of this, in part, to the lack of quality in the milk," he says. "We strive to identify genetic contributors who produce high-protein, high-butterfat milk, delivered in consistent but moderate quantities. The list of genetic problem makers is our own, and

we don't broadcast it. We just breed away from it, or cull it completely. This, to us, is much more helpful than the actual milk EPD itself, which is the most misunderstood, misinterpreted and misused EPD in the Angus breed," Dennis says.

Marketing adjustments

Their switch in calving times has prompted other changes to the operation as well. Erica says they don't have plans to do any early weaning, but because of the later calving date they will change their annual bull sale. "We'll go to a fall 2-year-old bull sale rather than our spring yearling sale," she says.

They plan to continue marketing females and donor cows, as well. But they realize there currently isn't a big demand for May calvers. It's a hurdle they hope to overcome.

As a result of the changes they are making to their cow herd, they've modified their advertising strategies, too.

"Rather than national advertising, we now focus more on regional advertising through Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming, Washington, Idaho and the Dakotas," Erica says. "We're focusing on marketing our cattle in the Northern Plains because our cattle are becoming ever more suited to it."

Even before the drought the Vosses focused their genetic selection on efficient, easy-calving females. Still, Erica says the drought has put a sort on the cows and made differences between bloodlines more evident. Their environment has made them even more particular in selecting and offering cattle that rebreed, stay healthy and produce.

Always optimistic

For 2002, the Vosses are still anticipating some dry conditions. But Erica says there has been more snow pack in the

Survival strategies

Range management and livestock specialists say the key to surviving a drought is being flexible with ranch decisions. Following are marketing and management strategies they suggest producers consider when dealing with drought.

Consider selling some of the herd now while cattle prices are fairly good and before using up summer grass reserves. Reducing herd size will lighten stocking rates on available pastures and help those resources last a little longer.

Plan how you will utilize available grass. Two strategies include (1) keeping the herd drylotted and feeding them a little longer in the spring to allow grass to green up and establish itself and (2) turning the herd out early in the spring to reduce the amount of hay you feed. If opting for this second strategy, realize that if the rains don't come, you may need to provide supplemental forage to the herd by late summer or early fall.

Another option to help stretch pastures is to drylot replacement females for the entire summer.

Lastly, beef specialists advise having a herd of potential "cull" cows grouped separately from the main herd. Then, if herd size needs to be reduced in mid-summer, you can do so quickly.

Kansas State University (K-State) Extension specialists Dale Blasi and Twig Marston suggest considering early weaning as a drought management strategy. They say calves more than 90 days old or heavier than 200 pounds (lb.) can be weaned with minimal complications. Research indicates calves that are fed balanced rations in drylot will weigh similarly to mother-reared calves throughout their lifetime. They offer these points to consider in early weaning decisions:

- ▶ Early weaned cow-calf pairs consume approximately 25% less feed than normally weaned pairs.
- ▶ Calf performance is not compromised.
- ▶ Dry cows will consume 30% less forage than lactating cows. They also require only 60% of the energy and 50% of the protein of lactating cows.
- ▶ Dry cows require 60% less water than lactating cows.
- ▶ It is more efficient to feed calves directly than to feed cows to sustain milk production.

Blasi and Marston say first and second calvers are the ideal candidates for early weaning because of their additional requirements for growth besides maintenance and lactation.

mountains than in the last few winters. That will mean there is some water for irrigation, which should mean they will have more hay than they had last year.

Erica says they've also been fortunate to have good water available for the cows. "We're lucky none of our springs and wells have dried up, though some have slowed and we've had to develop some more extensively."

Despite the dry forecast, Erica says their plan is to "hang in there and make changes as needed. We're always optimistic." She adds, "We are very proud of our cow herd. They have really come through for us."



Editor's Note: To track weather and drought conditions as they unfold throughout the season visit the U.S. Drought Monitor site at <http://drought.unl.edu/dm>. This site offers an easy-to-understand graphic map of current and predicted weather trends. As of April, the Drought Monitor showed a growing area of dryness encompassing much of the western United States, as well as an area of drought concern along the East Coast. For management strategies and other valuable links to drought resources, visit the Angus Journal "Dealing with Drought" topic Web site, www.angusjournal.com/drought/, sponsored by Pfizer.