



Watershed Winners

In an effort to save their farm and provide clean drinking water to New York City, the Coombe family did both, as well as win the National Cattlemen's Beef Association 2018 Environmental Stewardship Award.

by Becky Mills, field editor

On a miserable, rainy fall night in 1990, Dick Coombe sat in an ornate courthouse on New York City's 46th street. The Clean Water Act had been amended, and there was a hearing with representatives from the mayor's office, the state Department of Environmental Conservation, and staff members from Bobby Kennedy Jr.'s Hudson Riverkeeper organization.

"I was a member of the state assembly, but I was there as a farmer," Coombe says. "It was awful. One of Kennedy's representatives said that farms were bad, we needed to buy them out of the watershed and get them off the land. I was so mad I slammed my hand down on the desk. That statement changed my life."

Fortunately for all concerned, Coombe channelled his anger into action, and helped form the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC). Since then, the WAC has partnered with farmers and forest owners in a voluntary, locally led program to pay 100% of the costs of Best Management Practices (BMPs) aimed at keeping New York City's drinking water clean.

Conservation pays

It is money well spent. Coombe says 90% of the water in New York City comes from the Catskills Delaware system. "In the watershed, 85% of the land is in farms and forests. Over 90% of the 280 farms in the watershed participate. The water is so clean it doesn't have to be filtered," he adds.

The Coombes certainly do their part. On their Thunder View Farms, near Grahamsville, the six miles of streams meandering through their 2,000-acre registered Angus operation are fenced off, along with the riparian areas. Instead, the Coombes use a gravity flow water system to pipe fresh, clean water to their cattle.

Dan Deysenroth, Conservation Planner for the WAC, says those riparian areas, which are planted in trees and wildlife-friendly plants, do more than provide a buffer. "The trees form a canopy over the streams and

cool the water," Deysenroth says. "That is better for fish, insects, and algae. The algae act as a natural filter for the water."

The ability to pipe water to their cattle, wherever it is needed, is another conservation plus. It allowed the Coombes to adapt to Management Intensive Grazing (MIG). Using temporary electric fence, they portion off their pastures and move cattle every four to five days, before they graze the tall fescue, timothy, orchard grass and red clover pastures down. That win-win practice keeps cover on the soil and helps prevent water runoff and soil erosion.

Ric Coombe, Dick's son, says it pays for their cattle, too. "If you can put cattle on grass when it is 8-to-12 inches tall, and get them out by the time it is 4 inches tall, it will grow back to 8-to-12 inches much quicker than if you had grazed it down to the ground. It provides higher nutrition for the cattle, too, and allows them to maximize their genetic potential. Although part of it is genetics, our weaning weights have gone up over 100 lbs. (pounds) since we started our grazing system three or four years ago."

Even when Mother Nature doesn't cooperate, the family is religious about keeping the soil covered. Last summer, drought hit and their grass stopped growing. They stopped their rotation, put their cattle in sacrifice paddocks and fed hay. The drought was replaced by a monsoon. They got two feet of rain in a couple of weeks. The cattle stayed in those paddocks until the rain moderated and grass grew.



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Forages for the Future

The Coombes also practice stockpiling, or saving forage for standing hay. They take several pastures out of rotation in August, then turn their dry cows on it in November, when they'd normally start feeding hay. From then until mid-December, their cows can stay on the stockpiled grass. That helps them put up and feed less hay, and once again, keeps a cover on the soil.

The star of the supplemental feeding program for the 145-cow herd is their ag bag system. During the growing season, they put up pure alfalfa and/or alfalfa-grass mixes in the plastic bags, where it ensiles. They feed it in heavy-use areas made with geotextile fabric and gravel. Since each of the 200 feet (ft.) long, 8 ft.-wide ag bags have two ends, they can feed two separate groups of cattle at once. They put a strand of electric wire up across the open ends to keep the cattle from wasting the forage, then move it twice a day as the cattle eat it. The same heavy-use areas also have concrete troughs so their weaned feeder calves and replacement heifers and bulls can get one pound per head per day of grain as needed.

These feeding areas are located as far as possible from streams to reduce the risk of runoff. The Coombes are also conscientious about where and when they spread the manure they scrape off the feeding pads.

"We soil test every three years to make sure the nutrients are spread evenly across the farm," Dick Coombe says. "If a field is too close to a stream, we don't spread manure on it, or if it is too steep. We don't spread manure when there is snow on the ground, and we're required to keep records on where and when we spread it."

In addition, the Coombes are working on becoming sustainable on the power front, too. They've installed a wind turbine on the farm, and panels on a barn roof provide enough electricity to run the farm shop, as well as keep the meat freezer truck and walk-in freezer cool.

Dick, who is 76, his wife Penny, and his brother, Phil, 82, with his wife, Carolyn, also took steps to ensure the farm, and the water downstream,



stays clean for future generations. They've already turned the land over to the next generation, and have placed almost 750 acres in a permanent conservation easement with WAC.

Dan Deysenroth says it is no surprise Thunder View Farms won the national Environmental Stewardship Award from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). "For many years, they've been outspoken about protecting the environment, but it isn't just something they've talked about. They've gone above and beyond, and paid for BMPs out of their own pocket to get them done sooner. They really care about keeping the water clean for the residents of New York City."

Dick Coombe isn't the only family member Bobby Kennedy Jr. ticked off. When the famous politician called the Coombes' home and threatened to sue over water quality, Dick's wife, Penny, hung up on him three times.

That relationship had a happy ending, too. Coombe invited him to the farm and showed him what they were doing for the environment. "He caught pollywogs in the creek." Then the staunch Republican hesitates before admitting, "He became a friend." **AJ**



Thunder View Farms not only supplies drinking water to New York City residents, but top-quality home raised and finished beef as well.



The cattle shine, too

While the Coombe family's passion for the environment has been getting most of the press, they raise sustainable cattle, too. Since Phil Coombe started the operation in 1958, and was joined by his brother, Dick, shortly after, top-quality Angus cattle have been the focus.

In the years since, they've tightened the focus even more. Ric Coombe, Dick's son, says, "In an industry driven by the sale of pounds, we believe selection for feed efficiency and carcass quality are extremely important as well."

The focus on quality is making an impact through the supply chain. Thunder View Farms is one of a handful of operations that helped start the Integrated Feeder Program (IFP). Seedstock members of IFP sell their bulls to commercial producers, who in turn sell their feeder calves to one of the partner feedlots in the Northeast. After harvest, the beef is marketed through a natural beef distribution company to restaurants in the Northeast.

The commercial producers use the data they get from the feedlots and harvest facilities to improve their genetics even more, and as they do, the premiums they get for their feeder calves increase. In 2018, the Coombes had customers who got over a dime a pound premium for their cattle.

While that has definitely helped the bull market at Thunder View, their focus on carcass also helps at home, where they run a thriving beef business. "It is absolutely amazing," says Dick Coombe, Ric's father. "We can't keep up with the sales."

The steers, and the occasional heifer, that don't meet the standards for their seedstock business, grow on alfalfa silage after weaning, then are finished on grain for 90 days. They shoot for a 1,200-to-1,300 pound (lb.) animal and try to hit those weights by 13 to 18 months.

"Our customers can't afford a large animal," Dick says. "Harvesting at that age makes them so much more tender." This is all done with no antibiotics or added hormones.

To try to meet their customers' demand for beef year-round, they now calve 70% of their herd in the fall and 30% in the spring. Both Ric and Dick delight in the tie-in between their beef business and their passion for the environment. "People from Staten Island who buy our beef want to come up and bring their kids," Rick says. "When they see the cattle on grass, and pet a calf, it makes for a customer for a very long time."

Dick adds, "I don't know many people who sell for \$3.10 on the rail, net \$2,000 an animal, and sell to the people who are also drinking their water."