



► Jim Bradford, a seedstock producer from Guthrie Center, Iowa, developed six ponds that are fed by runoff from the steep slopes to serve as water sources for the herd. A special overflow system keeps the water moving in the ponds and prevents sediment from building up in the bottom.



Preserving the Future

Through careful management, Jim Bradford preserves his land for future generations.

Story and photos by **Stephanie Veldman**

The most important attributes caretakers of the land must possess are a strong set of values and a sense of responsibility for the land they have been entrusted with, according to Jim Bradford of Brad Z Ranch, Guthrie Center, Iowa.

Bradford, a seedstock producer, says that managing the ecology by maintaining good air and water quality and erosion control are important steps, but they are just material things. "If you don't have values, ultimately you are not going to have a sense of responsibility and a sense of stewardship for the land, air and water," Bradford says.

In July, Bradford and his wife, Mary, won Region III of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) 2003

Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) after being nominated by the Iowa Cattlemen's Association (ICA).

"Jim has long been an advocate of private land ownership, and the value it adds to the land. Since you care about the land, you obviously take better care of it," says Carol Balvanz, vice president of public policy for the ICA. "He is an advocate of managed grazing, of rotational grazing; he has built a number of water sources and improved the water sources on his farm."

She adds that Bradford was chosen as their nominee this year because he is a "terrific representative" for having a focus on the environment, as well as on profitable beef cattle production.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 156



► A watering site in one of Bradford's pastures is fed from a pond. Cross-fencing allows the cattle to utilize the water more easily, and it keeps cattle away from the ponds.



► Brad Z Ranch is visible over the tree line from one of the steep hills in southern Iowa. The hills provide wind-breaks for the cattle, and the trees provide shelter from snow and wind.

An advocate of private land ownership

Jim Bradford, Guthrie Center, Iowa, describes himself as being very independent. He says he is a staunch believer in private property rights, with a minimum amount of government intervention. He believes that through stringent management practices, caretakers of the land can maintain and improve the quality of the land, while making a living from it.

“I guess I am kind of a constitutionalist at heart, and I think the responsibility of caring for the land ought to be innate in everyone who owns or leases land,” Bradford says.

Bradford has used the expertise and advice of the soil conservation service on many occasions, such as building ponds and terraces and designing intensive grazing paddocks. However, he views government programs, like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), to be long-term liabilities to the livestock industry.

One of the liabilities, he says, is that CRP makes a price determinant for land rental values other than the marketplace.

“The program jacks up the price of land using our own tax dollars,” Bradford says. “Something other than the marketplace is determining the value of the land.”

He says the true adjudicator of value on the land is the open market.

“Jim believes the best use of the hilly land is to put a cow on it, and utilize that cow to realize some true income off the land rather than [to receive] a government-based subsidy check off the land,” says Carol Balvanz, vice president of public policy for the Iowa Cattlemen’s Association (ICA).

“Jim understands that no money from the government is free and that every time you take it, you give up some of your freedoms and some of your ability to make a living as you see fit on the land,” she adds.

Bradford says that another problem he has found with CRP land in his area is that a larger weed problem exists. The land in CRP is left untouched and Bradford says that invites weeds to flourish. Musk thistle has become more of a problem on his land from seeds that blow in, and controlling weeds has become more work.

“Those programs often actually reduce the real value of the land by allowing brush and weeds to take over productive forage systems,” he adds.

The ranch’s beginning

Bradford has always been concerned about the way land is managed. He grew up on a farm in Calhoun County, Iowa. The farm was located in a very flat, fertile and heavily farmed area of the state. His family grew crops and owned a small herd of cattle there, but he says other areas of the state are more conducive to raising cattle. In 1969, after his father’s death, he left the family farm to find an area where he could make better use of the land by raising cattle instead of crops.

In 1970 Jim and Mary bought 330 acres in the rolling hills of southwestern Iowa. He says he was able to make his first down payment on the farm by selling one-third interest in a bull, Atlas Marshall. “He was very growthy for his day — a very thick and heavily muscled bull,” Bradford says. “That allowed us a foothold to get started.”

Most of the land had been used for row

cropping, but Bradford seeded it down to convert it into grass pastures because he felt the row crops made the soil too vulnerable to erosion.

While the topography of the land was not conducive to raising row crops, it was right for raising cattle. The hills provide protection against the wind and winter storms, the many trees offer shelter from rain and snow, and the clay subbase in the soil holds water well.

“Generally speaking, the feed resources here are as good as anywhere — both the mixture of roughage and concentrate,” Bradford says. “We border the grass of southern Iowa and the cornfields of northern Iowa. The aspect of the southern slopes allows opening up feed resources much sooner than it does in areas that are flat. The trees afford good wind protection.”

Increasing cattle performance

Bradford didn’t have it easy when he started his purebred Angus herd. He started with 50 cows and began to buy more land and more cattle over the next 10 years. In the early 1980s, the “farm crisis” hit the Bradfords, like many others, hard with high interest rates and a high debt load. Bradford couldn’t imagine selling the ranch after the 10 years of hard work he had put into it. Rather than sell out, he offered a partnership to a friend in New Jersey, Walt Zimmerman, who provided the “Z” in Brad Z Ranch.



“I bought him out about 10 years ago, but out of respect for him I kept the Z,” says

Bradford, who has served the past six years on the Board of Directors for the American Angus Association.

Currently, the Bradfords own about 500 cows, 400 head of purebred Angus and 100 head of purebred Gelbvieh. He sells about 100 bulls as seedstock each year. The cattle that don't meet Bradford's specifications for seedstock are fed out in the family feedlot. Bradford uses these cattle to collect carcass data for his breeding program.

"We try to breed for as many balanced traits as we can," Bradford says. "High on that list are consumer traits, like marbling and cutability. But, I think the highest priority has to be fertility and reproduction. I guess I feel that any selection that you do that demeans fertility will demean the bottom line."

Bradford says that a good genetics program is key to his operation, but he also concentrates on raising the performance of his cattle through better management of grasses and better distribution of water systems to evenly distribute grazing and minimize erosion.

"Perhaps by making pastures with a little bit of shade in every one of them and crossfencing them, we allow for more contentment of the cattle because of our grazing system," he says. "The rotation system allows and affords more uniform feed throughout the entire year."

"Jim really understands animal nutrition all the way through," Balvanz says. "He knows how to get the most out of the feedstuffs he's got and, without making a high-cost ration, creating an optimal situation for his cows."

"He is very conscious of the carcass quality of the cattle he is raising. He understands we are really raising food here. It is not

CONTINUED ON PAGE 158



► A few of Bradford's heifers graze on a steep hill. Bradford says that a good genetics program is key to his operation, but he also concentrates on raising the performance of his cattle through better management of the grasses.

A new endeavor

Jim and Mary Bradford have always believed that by working hard they will achieve their goals, even if those goals differ from each other's. Jim has accomplished his by making his ranch, which he started from scratch, profitable enough to support a family with nine children. Mary is just realizing one of her goals — starting her own bed-and-breakfast in Guthrie Center, Iowa.

This is a project she began two and a half years ago. She had spent the last 22 years at home caring for her family. Faced with an empty house, she decided to look into new projects.

"When my youngest daughter Erin was a senior, I knew that I was going to suffer from 'empty-nest' syndrome if I didn't find another project, so I started looking for houses," Bradford says.

In fall 1999, she bought a nearly 100-year-old, large Victorian-style house. The renovations took about six months, and Mary opened it to the public in spring 2000.

The bed-and-breakfast has five bedrooms, and Mary says they stay very busy during the summertime. "They say it takes awhile to become successful, so I was not expecting to make a big profit right away," she says. "But it has been pretty successful and more fun than I thought it would be."

"People who stay in a bed-and-breakfast are generally very nice people — kind of a different class of people," she adds.

Mary invites anyone who is ever in southwest Iowa to stop in and visit. For information on Mary's Bed & Breakfast, logon to www.marysbnb.com.



► Jim (left) and Mary Bradford opened Mary's Bed & Breakfast two years ago when the last of their nine children was a senior in high school. The house is almost 100 years old.



► Bradford is standing on the waterline to which his pond should be filled. This summer a drought in southern Iowa diminished many of his water supplies.

just an animal, it is an animal that has a destination. And that destination is consumer satisfaction,” she adds.

Managing the land

Bradford’s stewardship goals revolve around leaving the land in better condition than it was in when he found it. He has managed his land through his cattle, using them to consume roughages that would otherwise go to waste, such as grazing cornstalks during the winter. This allows his cows to graze leftover forage, without the expense of time and money to haul other grains and feed sources to them.

“Our continuing goal is to be more efficient utilizers of roughage in producing high-quality protein,” Bradford says.

Bradford was involved in a Raccoon River watershed experiment that focused on utilizing cornstalk residues. He put in about 60 acres of a high-population hybrid corn, using



“Our continuing goal is to be more efficient utilizers of roughage in producing high-quality protein.”

— Jim Bradford

10-inch (in.) rows rather than the standard 30-in. rows. The hybrid only grows about 6 feet (ft.) high.

“What he was hoping for in planting the high populations like that was that he could get the corn off of it, but the plants would provide more coverage in terms of residue because it was planted so thickly,” Balvanz says.

“I certainly think it is advantageous in terms of canoping it earlier, covering the ground for rain control, shading the ground sooner, and minimizing weed pressure,” Bradford says. However, the seed is higher priced, and Bradford says the economics weren’t there to plant it every year.

He manages an intensive rotational grazing system on about 144 acres, with paddocks made up of eight to 15 acres, depending on the placement of water sources. The cattle are moved every four to five days, allowing each paddock to get at least a 30-day rest before it is grazed a second time.

“When we initially started this, we checked how many pounds we were taking off [the grassland] on calf weight alone. The first year we checked it we took about 470 pounds of calf weight per acre off of where we had intensive grazing,” Bradford says. “Of course, we were also feeding the cow, so if we were to look at a stocker program, I think we would be realistically looking at 1,200 pounds of beef per acre.”

Bradford put in six ponds, fed by the runoff from the steep slopes, to serve as water sources



for the herd. He encourages the cattle to graze away from the ponds by developing water systems away from ponds. A special overflow system keeps the water moving in the ponds and prevents sediment from building up in the bottoms.

Two creeks that flow through his paddocks are fenced off most of the time. Bradford does let the animals graze the creek paddocks when the water level is low and the cattle will have a minimum impact on the stream banks.

“Down the road, I think we envision putting up a windmill or maybe two windmills where we could use wind as an energy source,” he says. “Or we may look into the aspect of a solar pump in some of the more remote fields.”

For the Bradfords, the farm is the means for success of their main goal — raising a family in an environment that promotes responsibility and development of their capabilities.

“I think raising a family in a very positive, controlled environment was one of the goals that Jim and Mary had in mind,” Balvanz says. The Bradfords went on to raise nine children, and the youngest, Erin, is currently a sophomore at Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

“We don’t have many families in the state of Iowa that would have raised nine children and put them all through college basically with a cow-calf operation,” Balvanz adds. “That, in itself, tells us that he has been a tremendous steward of the land and resources.”

