

Agricultural Gifts

Steer Inc. works with producers to raise livestock and crops for a higher purpose.

by *Kindra Gordon*

There's no questioning the important role farmers and ranchers have in raising food for the world. But a unique program called Steer Inc. offers producers an even more significant purpose — raising crops and livestock to help fund Christian ministry and mission work in the United States and abroad.

"It's a great way to take something we love to do, which is raise cattle, and see it help with mission work," says Tim Dean, an Angus producer from La Fayette, Ga., and former Georgia Cattlemen's Association president.

Dean and his wife, Donna, who manage 35 purebred Angus cows, got involved with the interdenominational Steer program five years ago when a local missionary shared a video with them about the program and asked if they'd be willing to raise an extra cow. Through the arrangement, Steer would provide funds to purchase a heifer at fair market value. The Deans then had to provide feed and care for the animal, and proceeds from her calves would be donated back to the Steer program for mission ministry efforts.

They decided to get involved, and the offspring from that one female in the five years since has helped return \$4,000 to the Steer program. Dean says, "From a rancher point of view, I could never have just written a check for \$4,000 to missions, but I can put another cow in the pasture or calf in the pen, and I'm able to give my feed and time."

Paul and Linda Marrs, who raise

commercial Angus cattle with their three young children near Whitewood, S.D., have been involved with Steer by raising extra cows in their herd for about 15 years. Of the program, Linda also says, "It enables us to give so much more money to missions than we would normally be able to."

Their operation includes a commercial Angus herd of about 600 cows, as well as backgrounding calves. After they are weaned in the fall, all calves except replacement females are sent to a commercial feedlot near North Platte, Neb., when they are 8-12 months old. Paul's parents, Ray and Alice Marrs, and his brother Dan and his family are also involved in the family-run ranch.

Paul, who serves on Steer's board of directors, says supporting mission ministry work has always been important to his family, and they saw this as a way to use their livestock to support that Christian effort. "People in agriculture are often capital intensive and cash poor. Steer empowers people to give to missions through their time and talents in raising livestock or crops."

Steering money to missions

Founded in Park River, N.D., in 1957, the

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concept for the Steer program was, and continues to be, to utilize agriculture — the United States' No. 1 industry — to help raise funds to support existing mission organizations in spreading Christian evangelism.

To achieve this, Steer, which is nonprofit, uses a three-way partnership among donors, farmers/ranchers and nearly 90 mission organizations. Here's how it works:

Donors provide the working capital, which is portioned into individual units equaling \$700 each.

These units are then invested with farmers and ranchers who are committed to raising

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► **Above:** Tim Dean says he likes the lesson his children are learning from the experience. "We'll be out in the pasture and they know that's the 'holy cow' for missions," he explains. "It's something tangible that you can see."

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livestock or crops for the program. For instance, if a producer wants to take in three cows for Steer, he would receive funds to purchase three females to bring into his herd at fair market price (or to purchase three females already existing in the herd). The producer would then feed and care for those animals, raise their calves and donate the proceeds back to Steer once the calves are sold. (If the purchase cost of the animal is higher than \$700, the difference is deducted from gross gain on proceeds from the calves over a two-year period.)

Once Steer receives the proceeds from the farmer or rancher, the money is given to the farmer's designated mission. Nearly 90 mission organizations, representing mission work in the United States and around the world, are involved with the program.

The mission society receives 75%-80% of the gain from the farmer's project. The remaining percentage covers the cost of insurance and depreciation for the project, as well as administrative expenses incurred by Steer Inc. in managing the program.

Dean likes the fact that the program offers such a wide array of missions to which to donate. The mission organizations support individual missionary work, youth ministries, Christian radio broadcasts and literature, health care and hospitals, Bible institutes, and even world relief. "There's something for everyone. You can choose to give to missions that help kids in your local area or select an organization that provides mission work in foreign countries," he says.

For the Marrs, their support of the Steer program has helped fund two individuals from their home church in South Dakota to do mission work — one in Ecuador, the other in a college setting within the state. "It's been nice to designate our support to those two individuals who we know personally. We've been happy to help in that way since we can't do mission work everywhere ourselves," Linda says. Proceeds from the Marrs cattle projects have also helped fund individual missionaries in South Africa, France and the Ukraine, as well as in the United States, by supplying pastors to rural churches.

► Paul and Linda Marrs, who raise commercial Angus cattle with their three young children, have been involved with Steer for about 15 years.



Another unique aspect of the program is that it is built on the concept of multiplied giving, Dean points out. "If you spent \$700 on mission work, it would be gone. But by investing it in a cow, she has a calf and it keeps contributing money year after year," he says. Because each project is insured, if the cow dies or doesn't breed back and must be sold, she can be replaced to keep the project going.

The concept has proven successful. Since its beginning in 1957, the program has been able to send \$10.5 million to Christian missions. Today, the organization is headquartered in Bismarck, N.D., and includes more than 1,100 farmers and ranchers involved from 34 states — three-fourths of these are located in the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska and Minnesota. Last year the program included 1,976 cows and 362 feeders, as well as crop projects, dairy cows, bison, sheep and hogs.

Ivan Friesen, who serves as ministry development assistant for the Steer program, reports that due to the good markets this fiscal year (July 1, 2003-June 30, 2004), they have experienced their best year ever in

sending money to missions. He reports that more than \$726,000 was collected in proceeds from the ag projects farmers and ranchers have supported.

Paul adds that in 2007 Steer will celebrate its 50th anniversary and has already set the goal of sending \$1 million to missions that year. "Our greatest challenge is to find more producers willing to take on a few extra head of livestock or provide land for crops," he says.

A rewarding experience

Those involved with the Steer program emphasize how rewarding the experience has been for them.

Paul says the feeling he gets from being involved is hard to describe. He simply says, "It means a lot to see how God can take a bunch of cows and do something extraordinary. Steer broadens our horizons beyond the borders of South Dakota. We are privileged to have a part in others hearing about the message of God's word through our missionaries."

In Georgia, Dean, who has two young sons, Zach, 7, and John, 4, especially likes the lesson his children are learning from the experience.

"We'll be out in the pasture and they know that's the 'holy cow' for missions. It's something tangible that you can see."

He adds, "You often forget to think about or pray for other people, but when you see that cow, you don't forget."

Today, Dean's involvement with the program has grown past taking in a few extra animals. He also serves as an area representative for Steer in Georgia — a role that includes trying to find other farmers and ranchers to participate in Steer by feeding and caring for livestock or donating the use of land, machinery and labor to raise crops.

"People who don't think they can get involved in mission work truly can. Steer takes what we do on the farm every day and takes it around the world. It shows that if we work together and take an extra cow or two, we can make a difference," Dean says.



Editor's note: For more information, including a complete list of mission organizations involved, visit www.steerinc.com or call the Bismarck, N.D., office at (701) 258-4911.