

# Big Island Beef

Cattle have moved across the oceans since the late 1700s, and today it's no different for producers who make their living raising cattle on the island of Hawaii, some 2,500 miles from the mainland United States.

Story & photos by **Kim Holt**

**T**ransporting calves to the mainland from the island of Hawaii — better known as the Big Island, the largest of the eight major islands in the Hawaiian Island chain — certainly gives new meaning to “interstate” movement of cattle.

While the state of Hawaii is well-known as one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, perhaps it is little known that more than 700,000 acres of grazing lands are used for cattle production on the Big Island alone. Within the state, total land stewardship by beef cattle ranchers exceeds 1 million acres.

About 80%-85% of Hawaii's 90,000-head cow herd is on the Big Island, along with three of the state's largest ranches: Parker Ranch Inc., Kamuela; Kahua Ranch Ltd., Kohala; and Ponoholo Ranch Ltd., Kohala. These three herds fall among the top

25 U.S. cow-calf operations, as listed in the “Directions” issue of the *National Cattlemen* magazine. All three ranches maintain an Angus-based herd and incorporate Charolais as a terminal cross.

These operations hub in upland ranch country near the community of Waimea (also known as Kamuela), some 35 miles northeast of the coastline, condominiums and resort hotels.

Waimea used to be all Parker ranchlands, situated in the Kohala Mountains at an altitude of 2,500 feet (ft.). It was a tiny community before it was turned into a military base during World War II (WWII).

Today, Waimea, population 8,000, focuses primarily on tourism.

The area receives 30 inches (in.) of rain, with an average temperature of 67° F in summer and 62° in winter. Its grasslands

can support one cow per three acres; above Waimea, it's one acre per cow. It's cooler here, but travel some 10 miles south and the temperature warms up.

All Hawaiian Islands enjoy consistent weather. The average daytime summer temperature at sea level is 85°, while the average daytime winter temperature is 78°. Hawaii's two seasons are summer from May to October and winter from November to April.

Tourists who travel upcountry can discover ranching on the Big Island through visitor activities hosted by both Parker Ranch and Kahua Ranch. They can also dine at the award-winning Merriman's restaurant, which features locally grown beef and proudly displays its Hawaii Beef Backer and National Beef Backer “Innovator of the Year” awards (see page 74, May 2009 *Angus Journal*).

Even though tourism abounds on their island, ranch life for Parker, Kahua and Ponoholo is business as usual. Pono Holt, owner and manager of Ponoholo Ranch, points out, “We are from different parts of the industry, and from different locations, but have similar end points we are targeting.”

All three ranches retain ownership of high-quality four-weight calves destined for the mainland's Country Natural Beef and Ranchers Renaissance programs. These calves end up first in the Northwest, California or Texas for backgrounding, before finishing in either Texas or Oregon. Nearly all of the calves produced on the Big Island are transported via ship or air cargo to West Coast ports.

Cattle weren't always brought to the mainland, however. “We (the Hawaiian beef industry) had quite an industry experience back in the late '80s, early '90s, and we made some changes,” von Holt says.

## Adapting to change

Prior to 1989, the state of Hawaii had an 80,000-head cow industry. It had an overcapacity of seven packing plants and three feedyards, all competing for a 200-head-per-day harvest. It was a vertically integrated industry, and cattle were sold on a



► Introduced in 1936 from Australia via South Africa, Kikukyu grass is a primary forage base for Big Island ranchers, especially from 1,400 to 4,000 ft. elevation. Ranchers will tell you that it's better cow feed than calf feed, but, in moderate rainfall areas the grass will rejuvenate within 45 days during optimum growth. This grass grows 6 to 8 inches in height but never heads out. Its protein content is from 9% to 14%, but it has a very low dry-matter content on an as-fed basis, says Kahua's veterinarian Tim Richards. Very little herbicide is used on Hawaiian grasses; instead, pastures are maintained with management and rotation, and weeds are biologically controlled.

grade-and-yield formula in carcass form.

Producers shipped in feed for \$100 per ton and shipped out byproducts. They had \$250 per head in average costs at marketing, and their harvest costs were about 1.5 to 2.0 times the cost of the mainland. This state's beef producers only raised 30% of the beef to fill their state's needs. The remainder was imported into the islands.

When boxed beef came into play, Hawaii's cattle producers could no longer compete. "Basically, as the retail outlets moved into taking boxed beef, it forced us into more processing," von Holt explains. "Every hour we spent processing cattle was at a loss to the mainland."

Today, Hawaii's beef industry exports 50,000 calves annually to the mainland at a cost of about \$34 per hundredweight (cwt.), or \$136 per head on a 400-lb. calf. At best, they can ship calves in five days, as Seattle is 2,600 miles away, and Los Angeles is 2,500 miles away.

Calves from Parker, Kahua and Ponoholo are preconditioned 30-45 days before shipment. They're sorted to fit into "cowntainers," modified freight containers equipped with waterers, feeders and windows. Most are double-decked and divided into four compartments. Some 70 head of three- to four-weight calves can fit in one container, for a capacity of 28,000 lb.

While most calves leave the state via cowntainers, other methods these ranches



► The Big Island covers 4,000 square miles and is still growing because of Kilauea, the world's most active and continuously erupting volcano. This island is twice as large as all other Hawaiian islands combined, and one can travel around it in some 4.5 hours by car. It is also the most diverse island, and hosts 11 of 13 climate zones found in the world.

have used and are constantly exploring include air and livestock ships.

Addressing a tour of cattle producers on the Big Island, Earl Spence explains, "We import at a cost and export at a cost. The only difference between you and me is I don't have a hay bill," plus no tractor and fewer trucks.

Now retired, Spence worked for Parker Ranch for 20 years and later managed a large, old ranch on the southern end of the Big Island for 12 years. It eventually sold to developers and the park service. His father was originally from Texas, and was stationed in Waimea during WWII.

In his presentation to cattle producers at Puuopelu, Parker Ranch's historic home, Parker's Vice President of Livestock Operations Corky Bryan reaffirms, "Transportation is our biggest challenge, and weather is always the wild card."

Cattle are managed year-round; they stock in the lower country in winter and the higher country in summer. Their weather patterns are dictated by the trade winds, and September and October are their driest months. Ranchers depend on winter rains for the majority of their moisture, and their island isn't immune to drought. Bryan reports they had a "tough time" from 1998 to 2002, and that 2006 and 2007 were both dry years.

There are niche markets catching on, especially those for local grass-fed beef. Kahua's veterinarian, Tim Richards, says their ranch continues to expand its local marketing for grass-fed beef. But they've hit a bottleneck in the processing phase. As von Holt says, their packing industry, which includes five small plants on the islands, is lacking in infrastructure to process and market large quantities of beef.

For Parker, Kahua and Ponoholo, adapting to change is a constant, as is keeping on the cutting edge of technology in order to produce a high-quality beef product. Ranching on the Big Island is also about preserving the rich traditions of Hawaii's agricultural industry and the ties that lie between families and paniolo (cowboy) history.

We'll explore these three ranches in upcoming issues.



► From left, Ponoholo Ranch's Pono von Holt, Parker Ranch's Corky Bryan and retired Kamuela cattleman Earl Spence visit in front of Puuopelu, a Parker historic home.

MAP COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA