

Pride and Economic Sense

Aiming high is all business for these Nebraska ranchers.

Story & photos by *Miranda Reiman*

For Rusty and Rachael Kemp, there are very few traditions or ideologies that could trump the bottom line. The Nebraska Sandhills ranchers calculate the cost of making do with less grass vs. running an on-ranch grower yard. They pencil out what conservation practices are worth the investment. Yet they know it's not all about cutting costs, but also adding value.

Maybe that comes from their childhood backgrounds in the beef business, combined with first jobs out of college — Rusty as a financial advisor and Rachael working for IBP-Tyson. Dual degrees in ag business probably don't hurt either.

But they also give their banker his fair share of credit.

"You know, they say necessity is the mother of invention. We borrowed money to buy this place, and if we don't treat it like a business, we're not going to have it very long," Rusty says.

In partnership with his mother, Rusty purchased the ranch adjoining his home place north of Tryon, Neb., in 2001. He and Rachael were married later that year and have been building it side-by-side for the last decade.

Quality genetics

"We had really high-quality genetics," Rusty says. "From my grandparents' herd on down, when we've purchased bulls we've always tried to buy in that top one-third to one-quarter in quality, and we continue to do that."

At the time, they were using Herefords on the Angus-based cow herd to create black-baldie females.

"If we had a cow with udder problems

or disposition problems — something we didn't want to save any daughters back in the cow herd from — we'd use Charolais on them," he explains. "But if a cow gives us trouble anymore, we just take her to town, because there are 980-some other cows that aren't giving us trouble that day."

Market signals told them to phase out the Hereford and go straight-Angus, but they still try to buy bulls from the top of the pool, usually purchasing them private treaty before sale day. Rusty says that might cost them more, but it guarantees one thing: "I'm more concerned about coming out of there with the right genetics."

With the exception of a few day hires here and there, the couple manages the 30,000-acre ranch just the two of them. That is, unless you count the "help" they get from ranch additions Cash, 7, and Tucker, 3.

"I think it's important they're out with us when they can be," Rusty says. So they are — moving cows, riding shotgun in the feeding tractor or attending brandings. "Sometimes it slows things down a bit, but it's worth it. You've got to take a long-term outlook on things, and I think in the long run that'll pay off, too. I want them to learn work ethic and respect."

Given that labor pool, maternal traits are important both economically and practically.

Responsibilities

When it comes to dividing the to-do list, each lays claim to tasks that fit his or her



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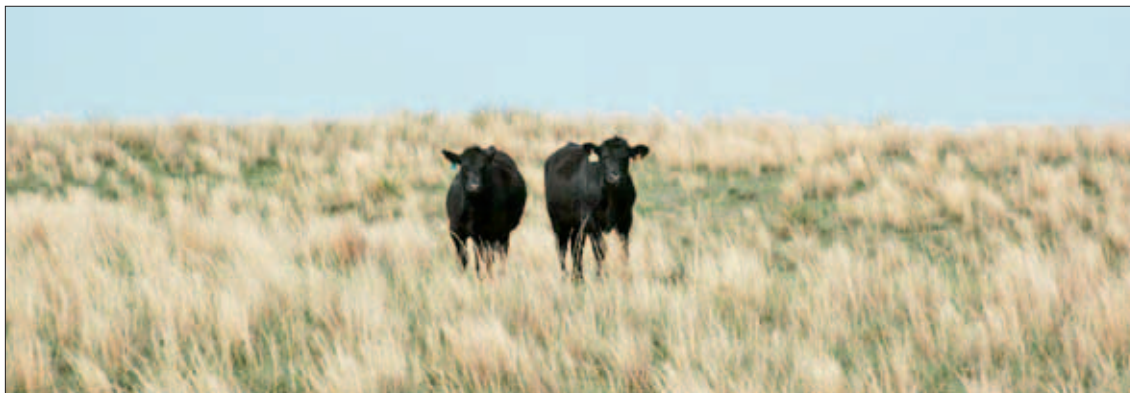
strengths. They make marketing and genetic decisions as a team, but an average day would find Rusty doing the feeding, mechanical and windmill work, while Rachael is often atop a four-wheeler checking cows. The bookwork, like calving and grazing records, also falls into her job description.

Rusty says her maternal intuition makes his wife the ideal match for calving season. She credits her own pedigree and experience growing up on a diversified farm in south-central Nebraska.

"My dad was always really good. He knew cows and could always remember little things about each of them, so I think that helps," she says. "It's gut instinct. If I think something just doesn't seem quite right, I'll go back and check, and if there's a problem we'll take care of it. Your gut is usually right."

Their goal is to make sure they don't need to do much troubleshooting.

"We're going to deal with these cows for 12 to 13 years, and we need a functional cow that's going to work in the environment we have here, which is a lot of forage," Rusty says.



They've worked to grow that resource, which started out as "one of the more abused ranches in the county," Rusty says, talking about the lack of grazing management.

Enrollment in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) helped them develop water and put in 18 miles of fence. That Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) program also helped kick-start the rotational grazing method now employed.

Tracking forage usage on the computer helps them see which pastures are more productive and makes for informed decisions on when to send cattle where. They try to give the range strategic breaks.

"If we do summer a pasture back-to-back, we try to summer it at different times to give different plant species different times to grow," Rachael says.

"We've still got improvements we want to make, but our grass quality has really gone up," Rusty says, noting a photo comparison from 2001 would show a lot of contrast today.

Since no such picture exists, they'll just have to rely on what's told in black and white.

"We don't just do this to feel good about ourselves. Those pastures are more productive now and that improves our bottom line," he says.

Tweaks to their nutritional program have done the same.

"They've adjusted their calving times to more closely match forage resources in their pastures," says Alan Taylor, their Purina Animal Feeds consultant. "Cows are reaching their peak lactation, which is also their peak nutritional requirement when the grass is green."

Since they only keep heifers that breed AI (artificial insemination), that calving season is pretty tight.

"It's better for our marriage that way," Rusty jokes. Starting April 20, the cows follow in a 60-day window.

Those females are prepared when they head into calving.

"We've got to have them on good vitamin and mineral supplements, along with protein, so that fetus is healthy and growing," Taylor says. He cites a University of Nebraska study

Continuing education

It's pretty hard for the folks at the Pioneer Ranch to take a day off.

Since it's just the two of them, Rusty and Rachael Kemp spend most days doing all it takes to keep up with the cows and yearlings on their Tryon, Neb., ranch. Yet when Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) asked them to host a group of foodservice distributors for an entire daylong training session, they didn't hesitate.

"I'm someone that believes in continuing education," Rusty says. "I certainly don't know everything, and if you ever stop learning, you're an idiot."

Meat salespeople from across the United States and Canada traveled to Nebraska in May as part of the company's Master's of Brand Advantages (MBA) program. (See "Brand News," page 102).

The small group rode along for the day, watching the Kemps turn on windmills and check the last group of cows left to calve.

"They were a bunch of first-rate people, very intelligent and ready to learn, and I appreciate that. They're busy, too, and they took time out of their careers to come out here and improve their skill set," Rusty says. "Any time you're around successful people, it's a good thing, even if those successful people aren't in your direct line of work."



that shows cattle supplemented during the third trimester raise healthier, higher-quality calves, whether that's in the feedlot or as replacements.

"If calves are deficient in some trace minerals — like copper; zinc; selenium; or vitamins A, D and E, they just become more susceptible to disease," he says.

No rancher wants sick calves, but for the Kemps it's especially important because the past few years they've sold them as natural yearlings on Superior Livestock Auction's Steamboat Springs sale.

Weaning in December, they had been going back out to grass with the calves, but when the economics showed high pasture rent and high corn prices presented a different opportunity, they pounced.

"We aren't afraid to change and try something new," Rachael says. With one less grass lease, they set up the backgrounding lot

for wintering cattle on corn silage, purchased hay and distillers' products. The cattle are now targeted for 1.5 pounds (lb.) to 2 lb. per day gain so they're 850 lb. at fall delivery.

They've had repeat buyers several years in a row and have developed rapport where some of those buyers share feeding and carcass data back.

"That lets us know if we want to change something up when we're buying bulls, what we should select for," Rachael says.

Recent reports show 95% of their cattle graded Choice and above.

"It's a matter of pride, too," Rusty adds. "You want your cattle to do well. We really push maternal traits here, but make no mistake, those cattle have to work in the feedlot, and they have to work for the packer, and they have to work for the consumer when it gets to the middle of that plate."

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