

Striving for Sustainability



PHOTO COURTESY KOPRIVA ANGUS

Creating a future for the next generation is what drives this South Dakota Angus family.

by *Kindra Gordon*

You do not inherit land from your ancestors; you borrow it from your children.”

That is a Lakota proverb of which Jim Kopriva often reminds himself. He and his wife, Karen, are proud to have raised their two children in agriculture. Today, son Lee works with them in operating Kopriva Angus near Raymond, S.D., and daughter Angela works as an athletic training instructor at South Dakota State University (SDSU) in Brookings. She spends her summers home helping with all facets of the operation and maintains some cows of her own within the family herd.

The Koprivas recognize that managing the natural resources on their land is essential to creating a sustainable future for the next generation. Lee returned to the family business in 2009 after graduating from SDSU with an animal science and ag business degree.

Kopriva Angus includes 300 registered and commercial Angus cows and about 2,000 owned and leased acres — of which 1,200 were at one time cropland.

Now, 20 years after they established their farm, just 130 acres are no-tilled and cropped with a spring-wheat/winter-wheat/soybean rotation. The remaining acres are native rangeland, seeded pastures and hayland, including 500 acres of alfalfa for hay that is sold to the dairy and horse markets. Lee, also getting established, manages cattle together with his parents' herd and has 600 acres of pasture about 18 miles from the home operation.

“When we first bought and rented this place, we thought we could maximize profit by grain production to pay it off as soon as possible,” Jim says of their journey from conventional cropping to managed grazing. “We learned we could net more income with grass, hay and cattle. Now, Karen and I are both 51 and Lee is 24, and our primary goal is to help him get established to continue the next generation. Conservation and grazing management continue to help us achieve that goal.”

Committed to conservation

The Koprivas purchased their first land in Clark County in 1991. This was Karen's home area, and they bought a place that neighbored her parents. They purchased and leased land bit by bit to get their start. Because the region is heavily farmed, much of the land they acquired was cropland.

But Jim — whose background is in ag finance — was prompted to transition their cropland to grassland and hayland over the past decade because of the escalating input and machinery costs, as well as his fondness for cattle and conservation.

“We used to raise crops conventional tillage, but it seemed there wasn't much profit left,” he reflects. “Now, we're focused on bringing most of our land back full circle to native grasses and pastures for grazing.”

Jim credits his commitment to conservation and grazing to a 1984 presentation he heard given by holistic manager Allan Savory.

“He talked about how America is

overgrazed but understocked,” Jim recalls. “I could see that his grazing concepts worked. That has stuck with me.”

More than 25 years later, the Koprivas are using many of Savory's rotational grazing concepts in their own operation, and they are passing those ideals on to their son as he gets his start in the beef industry.

“You can make money with cows,” Jim says, “if you can learn to manage your grass.”

He adds, “As you improve your grass, you can increase your stocking rate. It's a win-win.” He reports that rotational grazing has allowed them to increase their pasture capacity by 50%.

As they moved away from grain farming, the Koprivas sold their farming equipment. They now only have equipment for putting up hay and feeding the cattle in the winter months. On the 130 acres of cropland that they lease, they hire no-till planting and custom-harvesting.

When reseeding hayland to alfalfa, they hire it to be planted no-till.

“It's a better way to conserve moisture,” Jim says.

Improvements to the Kopriva ranch have included native and tame grass seeding, using prescribed burning on native grass for control of invasive species, and the addition of cross-fencing and water developments so that rotational grazing can be used.

In the fall, the Koprivas have their herd graze cover crops or crop residue — often cornstalks that they rent from neighbors — to take grazing pressure off their pastures and let

► **Above:** More than 25 years after hearing Allan Savory present at a meeting, the Koprivas are using many of Savory's rotational grazing concepts in their own operation, and they are passing those ideals on to their son as he gets his start in the beef industry.

forages rest and regrow for the following year. Jim says that by getting the grazing pressure off the pasture it allows the grass to build up root reserves and seems to have a similar effect that might be seen from fertilizer.

“When we see a \$20-\$30 benefit to the grass, it makes stringing up a few miles of hot wire well worth the effort, and the landowners appreciate the nutrients from manure on their fields, as well,” he says. The cost of renting cornstalks is minimal, he adds, because they typically do a trade agreement with their neighbors and help with the grain harvest.

Conscientious about cattle, too

Along with their dedicated stewardship efforts, the Koprivas are passionate about raising seedstock Angus cattle for the beef industry. They are using artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer to help build the quality of their Angus genetics, and they hosted their inaugural seedstock production sale at their farm in 2009. Lee is especially devoted to developing a strong maternal herd by studying cow bloodlines to make genetic selections.

“Our main focus is to produce productive cows with longevity,” Lee says. “For a cow to last in our program, she must have a good udder, be structurally sound, have a quiet temperament, be efficient and trouble-free.”

He adds, “We strive for balanced genetic traits that provide consistency. We don’t chase extreme pedigrees for growth or milk because our aim is for cattle that will work in our environment.”

Additionally, Lee says they are considering using DNA marker tests to assist with selection decisions in the future. “First and foremost, we recognize cattle have to be productively sound, but along with that, we see DNA as a tool that can be used along with EPDs as an indicator of cattle performance,” he says.

Animal health and biosecurity are also important to the Koprivas, and they regularly test their cattle herd for bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) and Johne’s disease. “We take pride in the fact that we keep a strict biosecurity protocol for our herd,” Jim says.

The Koprivas are also conscientious about how their management — particularly the timing and use of dewormers — affects the symbiotic interactions with beneficial insects such as honey bees, earthworms and dung beetles. “These and other beneficial insects have many important roles in nature that we are just beginning to understand,” Jim says.

Additionally, the Koprivas are active members of the South Dakota Angus Association, and they take part in SDSU’s Calf Discovery Program, which provides feedlot performance and carcass data on their calves. This information gives them further basis for their selection decisions.



PHOTO BY KINDRA GORDON

► “You can make money with cows if you can learn to manage your grass,” Jim Kopriva (left) says. His son, Lee (right), returned to the family business in 2009 after graduating from SDSU with an animal science and ag business degree.

Looking ahead, Jim says he still sees lots of conservation opportunities they can work together to implement.

“We still have fences to improve and water developments,” he explains. “I’d like to improve our grass stands even more, and utilize the prescribed burning more.”

He also sees a lot more potential to utilize cover crops, which will assist in extending the grazing season and benefitting soil health.

Jim and Lee have also had discussions about moving to a later calving date with their commercial herd to better match their

forage resources with the cows’ nutritional needs.

But, most importantly, Jim and Karen say they intend to focus on developing a “habitat” for their son Lee to expand and grow his cattle herd without accumulating too much debt.

“We want to focus on a sustainable operation,” concludes Jim.

For more about Kopriva Angus, visit their website, www.itctel.com/koprivaangus.

