



Developing the Next Generation

South Dakota Angus breeder encourages each of us to ponder our role.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

Habitat is a word often used with regard to conservation and managing the land. It is defined as the “natural home or environment of an animal, plant or other organism.” A basic premise among land managers is if you want more abundant wildlife, the first step is to create or improve habitat.

Raymond, S.D., Angus breeder Jim Kopriva also likes to use this concept as an analogy for fostering the next generation of young farmers and ranchers. Kopriva, who started his career in banking and then went into farming and ranching, says, “If we want to encourage young people

to stay in our rural communities, we must provide habitat for young folks.”

Specifically to the senior generation, Kopriva implores them to consider their role in creating such habitat for young farmers and ranchers and making it more of a community project.

Jim and Karen Kopriva raise registered- and commercial-Angus cattle on about 1,200 acres of native grassland, seeded pastures and hayland. They have worked to provide a “startup”

habitat for their 27-year-old son, Lee, who has his own herd of Angus and some land, but shares labor and equipment with his parents.

Kopriva notes, “All parents would love to

be in a position to set their children up in agriculture. The problem is that often parents of young, beginning farmers are middle-aged operators who are struggling to hang on to sufficient land base themselves, let alone jump-start their children into business.”

Thus, Kopriva says, “It takes the concerted effort of many community members to create this vital habitat, which would allow and encourage our young folks to stay in our communities.”

As an example, Kopriva suggests landowners need to be prepared to allow good, honest, hard-working young families to rent land without competing with the huge operations who are very capable of out-bidding beginners in lease auctions.

Points to ponder

As people think about the future, Kopriva

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hopes they recognize that the next generation is truly our most valuable resource. He calls them “more precious than gold,” and says, “Young operators bring many benefits to our communities; we need their energy. We need their creativity. We need their labor, and we need their children. Our nation needs a younger and well-established population of farmers and ranchers.”

He also poses the question, “How can our country feel secure about the stability of its food supply as the average farmer is nearing retirement age?”

With that said, Kopriva also notes we appear to be at a tipping point that could greatly affect American agriculture’s future.

“Finding a young person interested in

agriculture is getting to be a rare thing,” he points out. “Not many educated young people who didn’t grow up in production agriculture would consider an occupation that demands regular, long days with inconsistent compensation and high financial risk. It is even rarer for these young people to find a mate who is equally motivated and willing to stand beside her man planning, managing, cutting corners, often working part-time in town, while raising a nest full of children.”

Leaving a legacy

When a young person does have the desire to commit to production agriculture, Kopriva hopes the community takes notice and supports that young individual or family.

Kopriva says, “Hopefully, the wise older operator, perhaps nearing retirement age, can see that by helping this young guy get started, he will actually be helping himself and the whole community. Perhaps by helping this new startup, the older guy will have someone around to help him with chores or countless other jobs. Instead of renting his land to the big farmers, maybe the landowner would have somebody in the neighborhood to dig him out from a blizzard, or haul him to town for a doctor visit, or have his kids mow the lawn.”

“What a beautiful obituary it would be for the family of a community leader to be able to say he helped six young families to enter into the business,” Kopriva adds. “Maybe he loaned them equipment. Maybe he put cows out on shares rather than invest in Wall Street. Maybe he sold land on a contract for deed at a low interest rate. Maybe many things, but to share advice and encouragement; to become their mentor — that’s much more impressive than a few more zeroes on the checking account statement.”

The Kopriva family was the recipient of the 2012 Leopold Conservation Award in South Dakota.



Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is a cattlemoman and freelancer from Whitewood, S.D.*

Starting in cattle vs. crops

For young people looking to get started in production agriculture, Jim Kopriva suggests livestock enterprises can be much less capital-intensive than grain production.

He points out that today’s grain production often requires access to large (and expensive) equipment, borrowing funds to get the rent paid and acquire seed, fertilizer and chemicals. As margins shrink, grain producers often must increase the number of acres to justify all the expense.

Whereas, Kopriva says, “Livestock is unique because a young person can grow in bite-sized increments, build sweat equity, and build net worth and become commercially bankable.”

As examples, he says individuals may be able to buy a handful of older cows and rent some odd parcels of grass that are too small for more established operators to care about. With time and effort, this can allow for building a small herd. Learning how to artificially inseminate to utilize better genetics can eventually result in a respectable set of cows — without accumulating too much, if any, debt.