

Regional Environmental Stewardship Winners Named

Seven families were honored July 16 for their outstanding land management practices during the 2015 Cattle Industry Summer Conference. The Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) honors the efforts of farmers and ranchers who are dedicated to maintaining and improving their lands to ensure that they are productive for future generations. Several of this year's regional winners have Angus ties.

Cattlemen and women are America's original stewards of the land and the ESAP award honors their ongoing efforts to protect the environment. The program is sponsored by Dow AgroSciences, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Tyson Foods, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and the National Cattlemen's Foundation.

ESAP is celebrating its 25th anniversary during the year ahead. Regional and national award recipients serve as role models among their peers in the farming and ranching community, ensuring that innovative conservation practices are widely adopted by other land managers.

The 2015 regional winners are as follows.

Valley View Farms, Harrisonburg, Va.

Mike and Susan Philips, owners of Valley View Farms in Harrisonburg, Va., were honored for outstanding stewardship practices implemented on their 310-acre property.



Region I — Valley View Farms, Harrisonburg, Va.



Region II — Bull Hammock Ranch, Fort Pierce, Fla.

“Mike and Susan Philips live and breathe agriculture and conservation. It is not a show; it is real,” said Jonathan Repair, president of the Virginia Forage and Grassland Council, adding that the council nominated the Philipses because they are not only successful farmers and conservationists, but dedicated servants, as well, investing in people and the ag community. “They are true caretakers of the land and outspoken advocates for American agriculture.”

“Our legacy will be that we took care of our cattle and always tried to do things the right way,” said Susan Philips. “We feel that this land, these acres here are ours just for a short time. We are simply passing through, and God has given us this to take care of and to bring it up to a better standard.”

Valley View Farms is located in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley within the Smith Creek Watershed, which has been listed as impaired. The Philipses utilize nutrient management planning on their pastures and oversee forages to improve pasture quality and quantity. They have also implemented a combination of herbaceous and forested riparian buffers to protect all the water features on the farm, including sensitive karst features such as sinkholes.

The Philipses also work to institute the four key principles of soil health: maximize living roots, energize with diversity,

keep soil covered and minimize soil disturbance. They have worked to perfect these principles with their collaboration and experimentation with cover crop and grazing systems.

All the work Mike and Susan have done on their farm and education-related events are done outside of work time, which makes Mike's efforts more remarkable. He works as a technician for USDA's NRCS, while also being committed to his farming operation.

“When you get to where you think you're going to be, need to be, you're always seeing how you can make improvements to be even better,” Mike said, explaining his commitment to continuous improvement.

Bull Hammock Ranch, Fort Pierce, Fla.

“Bull Hammock Ranch and the other Carlton Family (Ru-Mar) Ranches are commercial cow-calf operations. They have an outstanding record for their environmental stewardship practices, water quality programs and management of exotic and invasive plants on their property,” said Jim Handley, executive vice president of the Florida Cattlemen's Association. “They have also proven to be pioneers in the conservation of water resources through their water movement, storage and water farming practices.”

Bull Hammock Ranch has been owned and operated by the Carlton family since 1947. The ranch is a 7,500-acre cow-calf operation located in Martin County, Fla.



ENVIRONMENTAL
STEWARDSHIP
AWARD

Through the years, conservation practices have played an increasingly important role in agricultural operations. Wes Carlton and his sister Mary Anne Cruse, along with other members of the Carlton family and a team of employees, operate Bull Hammock Ranch and recognize the importance of environmental stewardship and conservation practices.

“We have very, very good land. It’s very rich soil, probably some of the better soil in the state of Florida,” said Wes Carlton. “That provides us the opportunity to have really, really good grazing year-round. Number one, we’re a grass farmer, and that’s what we do first is grow grass, or grow forage for our cows.”

Bull Hammock Ranch has worked with agencies such as the NRCS, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and the South Florida Water Management District to make the ranch a showcase for water storage and environmental stewardship. The ranch currently contains a water farming area, located in a former citrus grove, which stores and treats excess water. The area can treat and store approximately 240-acre feet of water, which is critical to the long-term sustainability of local water resources, benefiting nearby urban areas and the fragile ecosystems found along the coast.

“Storing water provides habitat for the animals that have been displaced because of the urban development,” said Carlton. “The wading birds, deer and other wildlife have habitat here on the ranch, which provides the animals with a home after being displaced by the development around us.”

Glenn and Bev Rowe, Lorimor, Iowa

“When we bought the land in 1997, most of it was overrun with thistles, locust and cedar trees with very little grass on it. What grass there was was fescue and other less-desirable forage,” said Glenn Rowe, describing the Rowe Ranch near Lorimor, Iowa, that he and his wife, Bev, own. “Part of it had been farmed for a year [and] had soybean stubble, which didn’t amount to too much and it actually made it a little easier to put new seed in. But, it was a challenge every day.”

The Rowes have partnered with USDA’s NRCS on no less than seven projects, including rotational grazing, rural water pipeline installation, reseeding and fertilizing after soil testing, internal fencing of paddocks, installing heavy-use fabric at crossings, and streambank stabilizations. They maintain at least 23 paddocks, with the largest being 24 acres.



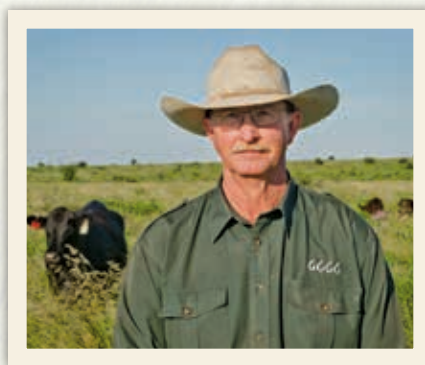
Region III — Glenn & Bev Rowe, Lorimor, Iowa

Herds are rotated at least weekly and as often as weather conditions dictate. Cows quickly become accustomed to being moved and usually are waiting at the gate to be rotated.

“Our rotational grazing has been a tremendous benefit to the forage production of this part of the country,” said Rowe, noting “it helps us better manage and distribute the grazing pattern of the cattle across the whole pasture.”

Glenn and Bev have transformed nearly their entire property, planting hundreds of trees around their home and dedicating 40 acres of ground to serve as a wildlife refuge planted to trees. Much of their land is managed as grazing land, but about 250 acres are utilized to plant no-till corn and soybeans, which the cattle graze in the fall after harvest. The Rowes have also fenced cattle out of farm ponds and added wide buffer zones to filter water that flows into creeks on the property.

“Our goal is to retain as much of the water on the land as we can and keep it as long as we can before it runs off. If our forage has the opportunity to absorb those nutrients from the water, that helps our forages and it helps the water downstream,” said Rowe. “Hopefully that improves the



Region IV — 6666 Ranch, Guthrie, Texas

quality of the water before it leaves our land.”

6666 Ranch, Guthrie, Texas

The renowned 6666 Ranch of Guthrie, Texas, which has been owned by the same family since it was founded in the mid-1800s, was nominated by the Texas Section of the Society for Range Management and the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA) after receiving the joint Outstanding Rangeland Stewardship Award in 2014.

Until the drought began in 2011 the ranch had supported a cattle herd since 1868. To protect the rangeland, preserve more than a century of genetics and save the livelihoods of dozens of families in a sparsely populated area, the difficult decision was made to relocate the entire cattle operation to other states until rainfall returned.

“Now that the area has received some beneficial rains, the cattle are coming back. Under the leadership of the owner, Mrs. Anne Marion, the goal at 6666 Ranch is to return the land to the way it was back in the 1870s, to a condition that is conducive to a thriving cattle herd and abundant wildlife,” said ranch manager Joe Leathers.

The 6666 Ranch operates with 51 pastures encompassing more than 138,000 acres of rangeland. Management units vary from a few hundred acres to nearly 16,000 acres. The continuous-grazing system reduces labor costs. Cattle are rotated in and out of various herds depending on age, quality and production.

In an effort to begin the process of returning the land to its prior state, the ranch management team began a mechanical brush-treatment program in the mid-1990s, working to remove the invading mesquite and redberry juniper that had drastically altered the landscape. During the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 216

Regional Environmental Stewardship Winners Named CONTINUED FROM PAGE 215

last 20 years they have been able to reclaim tens of thousands of acres of productive prairie by dedicating full-time operators and equipment to the task.

“This ranch when it was completely covered with brush would run a cow-calf unit to 60 to 80 acres. We can safely run a cow-calf unit now, year-round, on 30 to 40 acres,” said Leathers. “We have improved the stocking rate tremendously.”

In 2010, 6666 Ranch joined the Quail-Tech Alliance, a Texas Tech University-based research project dedicated to the education of biologists and landowners in the management of bobwhite and scaled quail.

Brad Dabbert, professor of quail ecology with Texas Tech University and Quail-Tech founding board member, says Quail-Tech would not be where it is today without the support of the ranch. “Mr. Leathers and the staff of 6666 Ranch have gone to unprecedented efforts to protect their grassland habitat, having moved thousands of cattle off their range.

“Their property contains the best quail habitat that I have seen in Texas, and last year we estimated their Southwest pasture contained more than a quail per acre,” said Dabbert.

American Fork Ranch, Two Dot, Mont.

“The American Fork Ranch is a part of Montana history, established in 1882 and dating back to the days of the Montana Territory. The Stevens family has owned the ranch since 1945 and currently has the fifth generation actively involved in ranch operations and the community,” said Jay Bodner, Montana Stockgrowers Association director of natural resources. “Under the



Region VI — Maggie Creek Ranch, Elko, Nev.

management of Jed and Annie Evjene, the American Fork Ranch has experienced a transformation in sustainability, stewardship and conservation through a number of public and private partnerships. Through a dedication to long-term stewardship, the American Fork Ranch continuously works to improve their cattle operation to benefit their environment, wildlife, resources, community and employees.”

At American Fork Ranch of Two Dot, Mont., they’ve found that what’s good for cattle production is also good for the wildlife — and by improving their pastures through crossfencing and adding an extensive system of waterlines, the work has also improved habitat for the native animals.

In 2008, American Fork Ranch embarked upon an ambitious, multi-tiered program to wholly rejuvenate the ranch’s native prairies. To do this, the Evjenes worked

in partnership with the NRCS and its Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). This program helped them to crossfence, develop water, complete range assessment of the ranch, collect soil samples, and develop a formal and intricate rotational grazing program. Specifically, the largest implementation was the addition of 25 miles of interior crossfencing. This divided 23 pastures that were once very large into more efficient average sizes of 350 acres, creating 49 efficient grazing pastures.

Grazing each pasture for seven days has allowed the ranch to keep forage in front of the livestock and increase weaning weights on the calves, while increasing overall herd health. Pasture start times are adjusted so that each pasture is not used at the same times each year. Resting each pasture for 45 days between rotation cycles has allowed them to clearly monitor the growing and sustained health of the range as the native plants and wildlife mature and flourish.

Some of the dominant wildlife species that share the open spaces of the ranch and its riparian corridors include antelope, whitetail deer, mule deer, elk, moose, black bear, mountain lion, bobcat, coyotes, ducks, geese, sandhill cranes, eastern brook trout, along with several other wildlife species.

“Being able to walk out here or drive here and see good healthy livestock, good healthy wildlife, clear running water and lots of grass, and knowing that we as a team worked together to succeed in this is very rewarding for all of us here on the ranch,” said Jed Evjene. “We wouldn’t have it any other way.”



Region V — American Fork Ranch, Two Dot, Mont.

Maggie Creek Ranch, Elko, Nev.

Maggie Creek Ranch of Elko, Nev., is in the business of producing high-quality beef while conserving and improving public and private lands. Their goal is to be the best possible stewards of their resources while feeding the world through production agriculture. The operation consists of approximately 198,000 acres of owned (deeded) and leased (public land grazing permit) land.

The Searle family and ranch manager Jon Griggs have worked to build long-term, positive relationships with agency staff and user groups to create an atmosphere of collaboration on both public and private lands. They see a challenge such as an Endangered Species Act listing as an opportunity for conservation projects for the betterment of the ranch.

“Our agency derives immense benefit because of Jon’s willingness to work collaboratively to demonstrate a shared vision for healthy Great Basin landscapes that benefit native wildlife species while also continuing the historic utilization of these landscapes by the ranching industry,” said Tony Wasley, director of the Nevada Department of Wildlife.

Since the early 1990s, the ranch has been a key partner in a collaborative effort to restore the Susie Creek watershed on both public and private lands with the goal of re-establishing Lahontan cutthroat trout. More than 25 miles of Susie Creek and its tributary streams have been improved through a combination of fencing and application of prescriptive grazing practices. Improvement of stream and riparian habitat conditions has been dramatic, and recovery is to the point where cutthroat trout will be released into the system within the next few years.

“We’re really happy about how the rangeland health is coming along and how our riparian values are improving. All that improves the value of the ranch,” said Griggs. “I’m really proud of the work that we’ve done to improve our riparian areas and recover the trout habitat on the ranch.”

In addition to riparian and upland rangeland improvement through improved grazing management, cooperative noxious weed treatment work between Maggie Creek Ranch and the Bureau of Land Management has resulted in effective treatment of thousands of acres of Scotch thistle and Russian knapweed. These efforts are ongoing and benefit



Region VII — Kopriva Angus, Raymond, S.D.

habitat and wildlife on both public and private lands.

Kopriva Angus, Raymond, S.D.

Kopriva Angus of Raymond, S.D., is owned and operated by Jim and Karen Kopriva and their children, Angela and Lee. This commercial- and registered-Angus and hay operation is located in northeast South Dakota on the eastern edge of the James River Valley and the western edge of the Coteau Hills.

Jim and Lee are responsible for ranch operations, which include 370 cows and approximately 2,700 acres. The Koprivas are focused on a sustainable approach to their family cattle operation. They dedicate themselves to sustaining native grasslands, pasture- and hayland they manage, and they are committed to creating a sustainable future for the next generations.

Rotational grazing has been key to maximizing production at Kopriva Angus. The Koprivas worked with NRCS to install more than 20,000 feet of crossfencing, which has allowed them to better manage their forage resources and implement a rotational grazing program.

“The main part of our grazing scheme is to always have acres of the operation resting, not getting grazed,” said Lee Kopriva. “If you have the ability through fencing and water development to focus a group of cows in an area of the pasture and then graze it, and then move them to another area and rest the area that you previously grazed, that really is beneficial.”

One of the practices of Kopriva Ranch is to use items that would otherwise go to waste, such as seed for cover crops. They create an inviting habitat for wildlife with their dams and dugouts, providing cover and water for birds, amphibians, deer, and

other mammals and insects.

“It’s fun to see the wildlife, and I think that shows that if it’s good for the ecosystem, it’s good for the ranch,” said Angela Brown, who explained that the family has made a tradition of sustainability, hoping to make certain the ranch is viable for future generations.

“I hope that it continues to grow. I hope that we continue to learn from our stewardship decisions,” she said. “I certainly hope that it will continue to be the family operation that it is today.”

“The cattlemen and women who we honor here this evening represent the very best traditions of American agriculture’s commitment to protecting and improving the environment for this and future generations,” said NCBA President Philip Ellis in announcing the regional winners. “These men and women understand the importance of protecting our nation’s land, air and water resources. They know firsthand that implementing the practices [that] improve habitat also benefit the bottom line of individual operations.”

For the past quarter century, the ESAP has honored one operation from each of seven regions spanning the United States. Recipients of regional awards are then forwarded for consideration for the National Environmental Stewardship Award, which is announced during the Annual Cattle Industry Convention. This year’s national award winner will be announced in San Diego, Calif., Jan. 27, 2016, in conjunction with the Environmental Stewardship Award Program’s 25th anniversary celebration.

Editor’s Note: This article is compiled from a series of articles provided by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association.