



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE REICH FAMILY



North Dakota Tenacity

After spring snowstorms and flooding devastated the state, ranchers are rebuilding both their spirit and their livestock herds.

by *Kindra Gordon*

The spring flooding and successive blizzards that battered North Dakota in the last week of March 2009 will forever be etched in the memories of the ranch families who endured it.

For ranchers, it was a scene akin to a war zone: Record snowfalls through the winter caused flooding and ice jams across the state as the snow began to thaw in March. But then, as the floodwaters rose, Mother Nature played a cruel trick as a blizzard moved in to freeze the floodwaters and dump more snow; two additional blizzards quickly followed suit during those last days of March and the beginning of April. Cows were stranded — or drowned by ice jams and floodwaters, newborn calves died en masse, feed was inaccessible or already depleted from the long winter, and thousands of miles of fence were wiped out.

The statistics tallied when the storms stopped howling were inconceivable and unspeakable — nearly 100,000 cattle in the state were dead, a loss estimated at \$55 million.

Today, North Dakota ranchers are slowly recovering from the losses, and like war veterans they are cautious about reliving the hellish events in detail. Instead, the story of the spring storms of 2009 is told in generalities and North Dakota ranchers are focused on finding the good in the future ahead.

One family's experience

Jack Reich and his family are among the state's storm survivors. Reich and his wife, Mardee, operate Reich Angus, a 270-head registered Angus ranch near Zap, N.D., along

with their three children Vander, Kaydee and Will, and Jack's father, Delvin.

Situated along the Knife River in the western half of the state, the Reichs were in one of the counties hardest hit by the flooding and blizzards. "Cattle were getting washed away, and then when the blizzard hit, we had 20 inches of snow on top of 2 to 6 feet of frozen water," Reich says.

Making a bad situation worse, the Reichs' cows were synchronized to start calving March 25 — the blizzard set in on top of the flooding March 24. Worse yet, their cows were on the north side of the river at Jack's father's ranch, while the Reich family lives on the south side. So Reich, his dad, brother and a hired helper stayed on the north side to care for the cows during the storms, while Mardee

— who was seven months pregnant at the time — was alone at the ranch with the couple's 3-year-old and 6-year-old.

"It was pretty scary," Reich says. "I kept thinking that if something happened to her and the kids, I couldn't get to them. I thought about that a lot."

Reich's thoughts were also filled with saving the seedstock cow herd he and his family have built their livelihood on. He credits his brother and a young hired man with helping day and night to save the cows and calves that they could. His dad, 77, did his share by keeping the three-man crew fed and by giving the good advice that comes from years of experience.

"The fences were gone, but we had to keep things going," Reich recalls. "We have draws and coulees that give natural protection from the wind, but they were filled with snow. We let all of the mature cows come in around the buildings and put straw where we could. We fought through it."

He continues, "The storm was also tough because we were short on feed after already having had a long winter. We used the bales we had as windbreaks."

Reich kept busy with the work, which helped keep his mind off the cattle he was losing. But Reich lets his memory slip to the past for a moment, saying, "One night was a bad night. We fought as hard as we could, but we couldn't do any more that night. We had to go to bed knowing we had done everything we could."

Then, Reich returns to his optimistic tone and says, "We lost our share of calves, but we



► Jack Reich and his family are among the state's storm survivors. He and wife Mardee operate Reich Angus, a 270-head registered Angus ranch near Zap, N.D., with their three children, Kaydee, Will and Vander, and Jack's father, Delvin (not pictured).



got by. For every calf I lost, I was able to save four of them.”

Now, six months later, Reich says it is easier to talk about what took place during that week in March. “When I look back on it, a lot of things could have been a lot worse for us. Our calves didn’t get sick and our buildings were OK. Other people experienced a lot worse.”

And, thankfully, his wife and children were all right, too. Their little boy, Will James, was born May 27.

Even some optimism

Reich, who is serving his second term as president of the North Dakota Stockmen’s Association (NDSA), is even ready to have some optimism for the future. He notes that ranchers in the state are “rebounding fairly well,” and he counts the summer moisture,

which produced abundant forage and crops for his ranch — and across the state — as a blessing. “We had to lose a few calves, but we had a good year as far as crops and weaning weights of calves goes,” he says.

“North Dakota farmers and ranchers have a lot more feed from this summer, so that makes it a bit easier to get ready for another winter,” he adds. In addition to putting up hay, Reich has stockpiled grass in his pastures, in hopes his cows will be able to graze into January if there’s not too much snow. “That will help us save our feed for spring storms,” he says.

Looking to the coming winter, Reich says he will try to have more windbreak panels, but he recognizes that he can’t change a lot.

“Because we sell purebred bulls each February, we don’t feel we can change our calving date that much,” he explains. “And

you just don’t know what the weather will do. Sometimes March can be better weather than April.” He has synchronized his herd to calve in two groups, heifers March 1 and cows March 25.

Overall, Reich chalks the experience up to simply being part of ranch life. “Ranchers are kind of a tough lot,” he says. “My grandfather and father have been through it. It’s just part of living here in North Dakota. You need to plan on [blizzards]. Once you get through, you just keep going ... It will be good again.”

With that said, Reich doesn’t diminish the somberness of the situation, either. He notes it will be a “number of years until everything heals up.” He mentions ruts in the yard, the fences that need to be replaced and, though it isn’t said, you know he means until people heal from the event, as well.

AY

NDSF able to assist 32 ranch families

When the news of the devastation suffered by North Dakota ranchers spread across the country, it rallied others to provide help. The National Cattlemen’s Foundation (NCF), with the financial support of Pfizer Animal Health and several private donors throughout the nation, coordinated a grassroots disaster relief effort on North Dakota’s behalf.

Pfizer Animal Health contributed \$5,000 in cash and nearly \$7,000 worth of Dectomax Pour On to build the special disaster relief fund established by the NCF. The product was auctioned off during the Spring Roundups June 1-6 in Grand Rapids, Steele, Rugby, Towner, Carson and Watford City, N.D., respectively.

Additional donors to North Dakota’s relief efforts included the Florida Cattlemen’s Association (\$2,500); the Giving Back Foundation of Helena, Mont. (\$1,500); and nearly \$2,500 in private donations from Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, Wisconsin and Ohio.

As a result of those efforts, the North Dakota Stockmen’s Foundation (NDSF) was able to provide \$20,000 in financial assistance to 32 North Dakota ranch families to replace or repair fences, buildings or other ranch infrastructure damaged during the 2008-2009 winter and spring storms. The 32 recipients were chosen from a large pool of applicants by an NDSF selection committee.

NDSA President Jack Reich of Zap said, “The financial assistance given to these 32 ranches isn’t going to make anybody whole again, but it’s a way to help. I’m proud that we were able to do it.”

Reich also credits North Dakota’s congressional delegation, state

legislature and state ag leaders with helping bring feed and other assistance programs in to help ranchers. “As ranchers we try to be independent and not look to the government, but in a case like this it helped — and was appreciated,” he says.

In April, USDA approved \$750,000 in emergency livestock assistance to help producers rescue animals and purchase and transport feed through the State Ag Department’s Livestock Feed Transportation Program. The North Dakota Legislature augmented the dollars with an additional \$250,000 appropriation.

In June, the USDA also made more than \$5.5 million in conservation funds available to aid farmers and ranchers affected by flooding in North Dakota. The Emergency Conservation Program funds are being distributed by USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) to repair agriculture land damaged by flooding. The money can be used to remove debris, rebuild fences, repair conservation structures damaged by floods, and other recovery activities.

As well, North Dakota producers were given the opportunity to sign up for the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP), which can help eligible producers with compensation for livestock deaths attributable to the severe winter and flooding disasters.

The NDSF, a support arm of the North Dakota Stockmen’s Association, was designed to assist with beef-related research, education, leadership and building objectives. To make a tax-deductible donation to NDSF call 701-223-2522. Donations to the NCF can be made at www.nationalcattlemensfoundation.com. Donations are tax deductible.