



Compelled by Compassion

Oak Ridge Angus gives back to their community and local food bank through the Range to Table program.

by **Bridget Beran**, editorial intern

At Oak Ridge Angus, compassion is the name of the game. Five years ago, Cheryl LaFranchi and her husband, Frank Mongini, started the Range to Table project with the Bear Republic Brewing Co. In cooperation with the University of California–Davis, the program takes donated feeder cattle and other meat animals and donates them to a food bank. While the couple often donates animals and helps with the feeding process, spent grain from Bear Republic Brewing Co. helps offset the cost of feeding out the animals.

“We process about 20 head of cattle a year through donations from different producers throughout the area,” Cheryl explains. “This year we received a grant, which allowed us to buy between four and eight animals in addition to the donated ones.”

During the past five years, the program has donated almost 22,000 pounds (lb.) of hamburger to people in need. Following wildfires in Lake County, donations made their way from LaFranchi’s home in

Calistoga, Calif., to the affected area. After floods devastated a nearby community two years ago, the Range to Table program was there to help, as well.

These donations are coordinated through the Redwood Empire Food Bank (REFB). To David Goodman, CEO of REFB, the donations are invaluable.

“It really started because Cheryl had the desire to make a difference for the hungry people in our community,” Goodman says. “She saw the connection to put beef into the hands of low-income people and provide something they weren’t getting otherwise.”

With protein, especially beef, which is often in short supply at food banks and for low-income families, Range to Table has been a difference-maker for the northern California community. REFB serves 82,000 people each year, some receiving assistance every day, some once a week, some more sporadically.

“Hunger comes in many shapes and sizes,” Goodman explains. “It’s important for people to understand that the hungry are all of us. Hunger is an experience that happens

in life and is part of the path of life. Sometimes it comes from decisions people have made, and sometimes it is circumstances beyond their control.”

Cheryl says they had deliberated what they could do to help their community before beginning this program. They had been working in partnership with Bear Republic Brewing Co. for 20 years, since it first started as a local brewery.

“As they got bigger and we worked together more, we thought maybe we could do more,” Cheryl says. “Everything goes to hamburger from Range to Table, which producers like.”

This opens up possibilities for different types of animals that may not be the best fit for a traditional harvesting process. Freemartin heifers, steers or bulls with minor injuries or slower growth are all good fits for the program.

Goals for the future include being able to increase their production to 20-25 animals per year. The grant from American Ag Credit will help this process along by giving them the ability to purchase more animals for the Range to Table program and allow them to further their mission of feeding thousands.

“I praise Cheryl and her husband for all that they’re doing. They are truly leaders,” Goodman says. “Although Range to Table takes place here, it could take place anywhere and be great. If the ranching community could get behind hunger relief, it would go a long way to help people who are struggling to eat. Ranchers are in a unique position to

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 200

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Legacy of livestock

Still, none of this would be possible without a long history of cattle production. With a little more than 100 years in the cattle business, Cheryl's family has been devoted to agriculture and raising cattle for quite some time. Following in her grandfather's footsteps, Cheryl is the third generation to run the ranch. They moved from a dairy herd to purebred Angus in the 1970s. These days, vineyards surround their northern corner of Napa Valley, where they manage about 400 cows, and they are about to host their 37th annual bull sale at the ranch.

One of the reasons they're able to manage as many cows as they do is because of their partnership with Bear Republic Brewing Co. Cheryl calls it the biggest change they've made in their operation since moving to Angus cattle.

"We're getting about 25,000 pounds of feed, six days a week," Cheryl explains. "It allows us to run 150 to 200 more head than

we would be able to otherwise. Our bulls, the Range to Table cattle and some of our cows are all fed by that grain."

Oak Ridge Angus also takes part in a custom-feeding program through the Sonoma County Beef Co., where they enter six head per month for market.

However, Cheryl says her experience would have been impossible without good timing and good family.

"I was lucky in how life worked out," Cheryl says. "My parents and uncle were older when I got out of college in the early 1980s, and we didn't have any hired help then. I've been very fortunate, especially compared to my dad and uncle. About five years ago, the cattle business took off, and it has been great."

Facing challenges

While the recent drought in California did cause Cheryl and her husband to downsize, things are picking back up again. However, working around California's crop and water paperwork is its own mountain to climb. Their ground features a pond that was built during the conservation acts in 1958 but missed being licensed in inheritance pacts.

Though the pond has existed for almost 60 years, it's no longer within the legal ramifications, and Cheryl says they've paid thousands of dollars to keep the pond.

"I have two different firms working to keep us in compliance with the government," Cheryl says. "Working with the government is by far the hardest thing for any small business."

At the end of the day, though, the future of Oak Ridge Angus is based in the LaFranchi family. While Cheryl's nieces have an interest in agriculture, the timing hasn't quite aligned for them to return to work full-time on the ranch, with one working for the California Farm Bureau and the other finishing her degree in ranch and land management and agricultural business.

"Everything we do is done in-house by the family. It will definitely change as we have family that lives on the ranch but works off of it," Cheryl says. "We'll see how it goes, but for now, with everyone living here, it's a great time as a family."



Editor's Note: *Bridget Beran was the summer 2016 editorial intern for Angus Media.*