

Private Lands Pride



PHOTO BY MICKEY WILSON

In the new era of speaking up for agriculture, Nebraska's Sherry Vinton emphasizes the importance of talking about the value of private lands ownership as well.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Living on a family ranch in the remote Nebraska Sandhills near Whitman, it would be easy for Sherry Vinton to go about her ranch work without much interaction with the non-ranching public.

But Vinton recognizes that the cattle she, husband Chris and their family raise on their ranch become the food that consumers buy — and, thus, it is important to build a relationship with consumers — from local communities to big cities — by sharing how farmers and ranchers are families who care for the land and livestock.

In the past year, the ag industry has stepped up efforts to do a better job of communicating with consumers about the animal care and stewardship practices in place on American farms and ranches. But Vinton believes part of that message conveyed to consumers should also emphasize the importance of private lands ownership.

Particularly, Vinton wants the public to understand that private property rights are a foundation to stewardship.

"I believe private ownership is what keeps agriculture so successful," she says. "It's why farmers and ranchers take care of the landscape and produce safe food, good kids and a good environment."

"I truly believe one of the primary reasons the Nebraska Sandhills have been so well taken care of is because of private land ownership," she adds.

That conviction for informing and educating consumers about agriculture has

propelled Vinton into an active role. In addition to ranch work, she is a current member of the Grant County Planning Commission, serves on the board of directors for Nebraska Farm Bureau and the Nebraska Environmental Trust, and is treasurer for the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition (NGLC).

"Agriculture needs to speak with a unified voice," Vinton emphasizes. She points out that the public doesn't distinguish differences between a rancher, corn farmer or citrus grower. To them it is all agriculture, so with regard to water and land use issues, we need to speak up for all of agriculture.



Sherry Vinton

"There are many opportunities to work with the environmental community," she says. "It's just important to have a true understanding of issues at stake."

Five generations and growing

Chris Vinton's great-great-grandfather started the family's ranch operation near Whitman in the late 1880s, making Chris and Sherry the fifth generation on the ranch. Their daughter and son and their families have also returned to the commercial Angus cow-calf operation as the sixth and seventh generations on the ranch. Chris and Sherry's third child attends high school in Arthur.

Replacement females and feeder steers and heifers are the primary commodity sold off the ranch. The Vintons also raise Quarter horses and offer some limited fee hunting on their Sandhills property.

Vinton feels fortunate that their ranch was able to expand through leasing land from a neighbor and adding more cattle so that her son and daughter could come back to the operation with their families.

"We never pushed our kids to come home, but if you want to give them that opportunity, you have to plan and be responsible both as land stewards and financially. ... If you've structured your business with expansion for the future in mind, it is easier to transition when opportunities or unexpected events present themselves," she says.

Talking stewardship

Rotational grazing was implemented on the Vinton's ranch in 1997. They use a four-pasture deferred rotation system during the summer. Based on their experience with range management, the couple was then asked to serve as mentors for the NGLC's Cowboy Logic program, which is a network of land managers around the state whom other landowners can call upon to learn about grazing management practices.

"One of the things the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition does so well is sharing their stewardship efforts with others. It's not formal or structured; it's just neighboring, and we need to do more of that with fellow landowners and with the public," Vinton says.

Vinton has made that a priority in the last few years as she and a fellow Sandhills ranch wife, Tanya Storer, have spoken to several landowner and environmental groups in their region and on the national level about agriculture pertaining to private property, stewardship and land use issues.

"We noticed a trend in the conservation community where the basic principles of ownership that our country was founded on had changed," Vinton says. "We wanted to highlight the importance of ownership and

Optimistic outlook

"I think the future in production agriculture is bright, especially for grass-based agriculture," Sandhill rancher Sherry Vinton says. "Grasslands are our biggest asset, and as a landowner you want to optimize that resource."

As a means to help landowners do that, Vinton says she is especially excited about the range monitoring program now being offered to Nebraska landowners by the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition.

"It's hard to improve what you can't or don't measure," Vinton says. "Monitoring helps ranchers be consistent in their management, and I think documenting what we do on our ranches is going to become increasingly important in the future."

private property rights and how well ranchers take care of the landscape."

Vinton says her aim is to help build awareness and understanding with regard to conservation. She gives the example that most farmers and ranchers view conservation as taking care of the land while still using the resources it provides; whereas,

other interest groups may use the words preservation and restoration.

"Conservation, preservation and restoration are all words being used, and they don't necessarily mean the same thing. We want to highlight that there is an important difference, and as a landowner you need to understand the differences," Vinton says.

"Words are important," she adds, "especially when dealing with a contract [such as easements]. So landowners must make sure they understand the legal aspects." Similarly, as climate change legislation and federal estate tax issues face reform, Vinton stresses the importance of understanding the issues.

Bottomline, she says, "Make sure you're not legally binding yourself to something you don't understand."

She is hopeful that by educating and informing the public about real ranch families, they will better understand the issues that impact agriculture as they make decisions in the voting booth, as well.

Sherry Vinton and her daughter, Jessica, will be sharing their ranch story at the Nebraska Grazing Conference Aug. 10-11 in Kearney, Neb. For more information visit www.grassland.unl.edu/grazeconf.htm.

