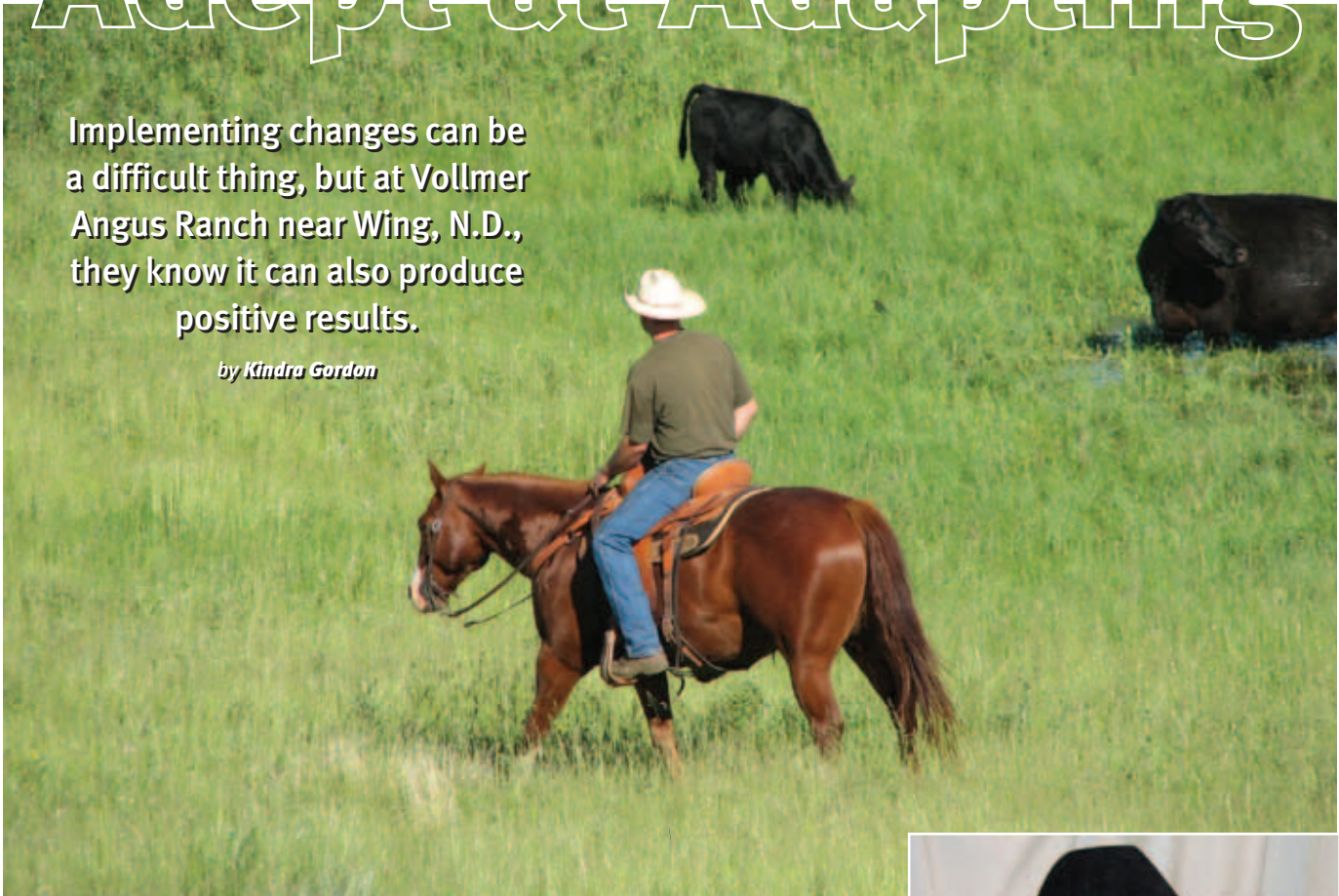


Adept at Adapting

Implementing changes can be a difficult thing, but at Vollmer Angus Ranch near Wing, N.D., they know it can also produce positive results.

by Kindra Gordon



PHOTOS COURTESY VOLLMER ANGUS RANCH

We've all heard industry experts who challenge our thinking — suggesting big changes such as modifying grazing management practices or re-evaluating how and when we market cattle.

Most of us will tuck those ideas in the back of our minds, mull them over, but hesitate when it comes to implementing real changes. But at the Vollmer Angus Ranch near Wing, N.D., they recognize that adapting with changing times is key to sustainable success over the generations.

The Vollmer Ranch was originally purchased more than 50 years ago by Alvin and Verna Vollmer. In the late 1960s, their son Allen and his wife, Bev, established the registered Angus herd, and today their son Troy and his wife, Sara, and their three young daughters are co-owners of the operation that has grown to include 600 registered Angus cows on 9,000 acres of deeded and leased land.

Forage focus

For an Angus operation to thrive from one family generation to the next, the Vollmers

have learned that aiming to continually improve is an important focus. Troy and Allen have established a ranch mission statement to guide their decision-making. It reads:

“To produce high-quality Angus cattle that strive and thrive in the realistic but harsh environment of the Dakotas. We desire to breed cattle of outstanding phenotype, structure and genetic excellence that runs deep into the pedigree ancestry. We insist that the cattle of this nature survive on minimal inputs while producing a palatable end product through the conversion of forage. It is extremely important that the cattle be reproductively efficient, enabling them to be a sound financial investment.”

With this, the Vollmers have placed a focus on their forage management and have implemented many changes over the years to achieve that goal of “minimal inputs.”

Troy tells that rotational grazing is something he grew up with, and his dad instilled in him the importance of grazing management. While at NDSU, Troy also took several range science classes that further



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piqued his interest in pasture and natural resource management. Today, he continues to expand his knowledge by attending tours and workshops and being involved with the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition. “All of those experiences have broadened my understanding of range management and

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►**Above:** The Vollmers have intensified their grazing systems during the last decade. Troy Vollmer shares that the ranch utilizes several cool-season grass combinations for early spring grazing.

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how it can affect the profitability of a working ranch,” says Troy.

Among the resource management practices the Vollmers have implemented during the last decade are intensifying grazing systems, adding no-till farming practices and utilizing cover crops to extend the grazing season.

Specifically, Troy shares that the ranch utilizes several cool-season grass combinations for early spring grazing. These pastures consist primarily of meadow brome, crested wheatgrass, smooth brome, and a legume for increased stand viability and soil health. During the summer and early fall, their cattle graze native prairie. Then, in late fall and early winter, the Vollmer herd will graze cornstalks, cover crops, and crop aftermath from the Vollmer’s forage crop acres.

“This scenario has greatly increased the length of our grazing season,” Troy says. “We are able to graze much earlier in the spring without hurting the production levels of our native grasses. It also allows us to fully utilize our native acres, then allow them rest and recovery, and move to excellent crop grazing opportunities in the fall and winter. Our goal is to be able to utilize every available grazing day that Mother Nature allows us.”

He adds, “The ultimate goal is to develop a more sustainable livestock operation. To fully achieve this you have to make changes. One of the changes that we made was to eliminate silage from the operation. Today, we are leaving more forage on the ground for livestock consumption and also for consumption by the soil biology. It’s been an effective way to lower input costs and the dependence of fossil fuels.”

More innovative ideas at work

The Vollmers have learned that to keep up with changing times, you need to be willing to try change and see what works for your operation as well.

Presently, their main herd still calves beginning March 10, which is pretty traditional for their region. They have started a summer-calving herd that will calve in June and July on pasture, just to see how that works with their operation and their forage management.

Looking ahead, Troy says he is also eager to keep experimenting with several different crops and crop combinations.

“My goal is to plant a crop that is high in diversity, provides high nutrition levels for the livestock, and creates a high level of nutrient cycling so during the next crop year I could drastically reduce the amount of commercial fertilizer required,” he says. “The livestock play a huge role in making this process reality.”

In offering advice to other cattlemen — particularly seedstock producers — who might be interested in an intensive grazing program, Troy says, “Any type of operation can have an intensive grazing program. As a seedstock producer there are certainly added challenges from a management perspective, but they are not insurmountable. Intensive grazing programs are a great tool. You may only use it during certain times of the year when it is feasible, but even at a modest level, tremendous long-term benefits to the land and livestock are possible.”

► For an Angus operation to thrive from one family generation to the next, the Vollmers have learned that aiming to continually improve is an important focus. Pictured here are (from left) Brooklyn, Troy, Callie, Sara and Haley Vollmer.



Troy concludes, “One of the greatest benefits of these practices has been the renewed focus on ‘sustainable agriculture management practices.’ The focus towards soil health creates healthy grasslands, which in turn creates more productive mother cows. It is a win-win for everyone and everything at Vollmer Angus.”

Attention to customer needs

As seedstock suppliers, the Vollmers are also tuned in to serving the customers who purchase their genetics.

With that in mind, Troy says the relationship he has built with his bull customers is one of the things he enjoys most about the seedstock business.

“They are great people and I have

created lifelong friendships,” he notes. “The challenge of producing seedstock to meet their operational goals on a yearly basis is one of my biggest goals. There is no more humbling feeling in the business than when good, honest, hard-working people drive into your yard to purchase their seedstock needs for the year.”

To better meet customer needs, in 2010 the Vollmers moved their annual February production sale to early May at the ranch.

“We wanted to hopefully have a nicer weather day, creating a more relaxed environment for everyone involved,” Troy explains. “Also, in North Dakota many people have moved their calving date to later in the spring to avoid weather and labor issues; therefore, many producers do not need their bulls as early as they used to, and this provides a way to better accommodate their needs.”

Looking ahead, Troy’s philosophy will be to continue to have an open mind and embrace changes that benefit Vollmer Angus Ranch and its customers for future generations.

“The beef industry is a huge segment of the economy that is full of opportunity,” he concludes. “It is a great industry to be involved in that experiences change and technological advancement rapidly. It might not be the easiest industry to be involved in, but without question, it can be one of the most rewarding.”

