

Labor and Learning

Hands-on agricultural internships can provide ranchers with labor and college students with life skills.

by *Kim Kanzler Holt*

If you're short on labor but are willing to devote time and effort into the younger generation whose interest and career aspirations lie in agriculture, you might consider hosting a college intern or sponsoring an internship program on your ranch.

The Prather Ranch in northern California and the IX Ranch Co. in north-central Montana both offer internships for agricultural students.

Blue-ribbon operations

Prather and IX are two top-notch

commercial operations that use registered Angus bulls and are committed to excellence in livestock production and environmental stewardship.

Both value their employees and have standard operating procedures (SOPs) and best management practices (BMPs) in place. But like many agricultural operations, Prather Ranch and IX are often challenged when it comes to finding affordable, dependable labor. This is where ranch interns lend a hand.

"One of the big things we struggle with is employment and getting good people," says Richard Roth of the IX. "Internships are a great opportunity for us to get a few extra hands. Interns are young and energetic and anxious to learn. We hope that they will someday want to work for us in a larger capacity."

Prather Ranch's Mary Rickert also says internships are an opportunity to see if an intern is someone who could work well in the Prather program after college. "That is oftentimes the real advantage of internships," she says.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PRATHER RANCH

▶ As a conception-to-consumer operation, Prather Ranch offers interns a varied work experience with hay and cattle. The Prather bales 18,000 tons of hay each summer, mostly alfalfa.

Both ranches have hired former interns, and Mary says it works well for Prather Ranch, which has a limited pool from which to acquire farm employees.

“Our labor pool seems to be shrinking all of the time,” she observes. “And I do have deep concerns about who is going to be producing our food in 20 years.”

A hands-on work experience

While internships like those on the Prather and IX ranches are a great way to generate additional labor, they also give college students a taste of the food production sector.

Unlike other internships that are volunteer-based with information as the only compensation, Prather Ranch and the IX offer both pay and experience. To work on either of these ranches, however, interns must have the right attitude, a willingness to learn and an affinity for hard work.

Prather puts up some 18,000 tons of hay each summer and is a conception-to-consumer cattle operation. The ranch operates near Fall River Mills and Macdoel, Calif. It is managed by Mary and her husband, Jim, and their youngest son, James. Natural and organic beef and bovine pharmaceutical materials are products that result from the ranch's 1,550 English-cross cows. (See “Setting the Bar,” page 88 of the June 2005 *Angus Journal*, also available at www.angusjournal.com.)

About 1,000 head of the calves are finished and harvested on-site in Prather's U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-inspected facility. Prather natural beef is then marketed in southern Oregon and northern California; the certified organic beef is marketed in Sacramento, Calif., and the San Francisco Bay areas.

Prather Ranch employs three to five interns per summer, and students come from all over, including the Midwest — they've done so for about 15 years. Interns primarily go to Macdoel, about 100 miles north of the Fall River Mills valley, where they're provided housing and utilities and beef at an employee discount. They are paid a monthly salary and, if they finish the internship, a bonus before they go back to college.

Mary asks for a résumé and tries to have personal contact with internship candidates.

“If it sounds like somebody who is going to be serious about it, we encourage them to keep talking to us. We're very clear that this is a hands-on working internship. ‘Bring your gloves and be ready to go to work’ is the thing we tell them before they show up.”

“We really enjoy the interns,” she asserts. “It gives us an opportunity to learn some of



► Interns representing three different universities, including Michigan State, Kansas State and Chico State, work on an irrigation water diversion at the Prather Ranch headquarters.

the new things they might be learning in college; it's an exchange of ideas. Because we're vertically integrated, we do try to expose them to all aspects of our operation. We really think that it's so important that young people get a hands-on experience.”

Mary, Jim and James all graduated from California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) in San Luis Obispo. Mary is a third-generation Cal Poly alumna; her grandfather was president of the university from 1933-1966.

“He really emphasized the upside-down approach to education, where you took your major courses first and your liberal studies courses later,” she says. “That way, in case you had to go back to the farm, you were prepared.”

She explains that interns work two weeks in hay production and then rotate to work a

week with the cattle. They may process cattle or ultrasound, and can even work in the packing facility, helping harvest, process and package beef. Some interns also go to San Francisco to the Prather storefront at the Ferry Building.

“We think it's important that they see the retail marketing, too,” Mary says. “If we have a student who is extraordinarily interested in the entire process, then we're able to make that all available for them.”

Mary says the internship gives students the chance to see if this is what they really want to do in life. “If it isn't, they'll know to go in a different direction.”

Learning the right way

The IX Ranch has been family owned and operated since 1955. The third-generation

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Ranching teaches work ethic

While individuals who make their living in production agriculture know very well how much time and effort goes into farming and ranching, oftentimes the newer generation studying agricultural careers does not.

As Mary Rickert of California's Prather Ranch points out, a lot of animal science graduates of today actually grew up in the city. Others, as Richard Roth observes, may have grown up in 4-H, but with just one horse.

“In cases like these, there is a very big difference between the student's theory and the actual reality of what it takes to run a ranch,” says Richard, who oversees the internship program at IX Ranch Co. in north-central Montana. He describes it as a shell-shock effect for some students.

“Society has changed quite a bit in terms of what people think is work and what work actually is. What we see happening is a lot of kids have actually not had to push a shovel or a broom.”

He says students arrive with misconceptions about running a ranch in the 21st century and the work involved. But they leave with a much better appreciation and the know-how to work — one aspect that makes him extremely proud.

“There's no better experience than real life. Whatever job you take after doing this will seem like a cakewalk,” he says, “unless you work for a dairy.”

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cow-calf and yearling outfit operates in and around the Bear Paw Mountain Range near Big Sandy, Mont. It's about 250 miles due north of Billings.

Steve Roth manages the ranch. His son,

Richard, is responsible for marketing the ranch's livestock, maintaining its range management software, and administering the web site, safety and internship programs. Before returning to the ranch in 2001,

Richard worked 10 years in agricultural commodity marketing.

The IX uses word of mouth, its web site and correspondence with agricultural universities to fulfill the internships. They

formalized their program in 2002, which, Richard says, "made it easier for universities to buy into it." Since then, the IX has hosted 12-14 young men and women from universities across the country. Many come from the East, especially Virginia Tech, drawn to the West by the size and scale of commercial operations.

The IX offers room and board plus a monthly salary. Students fill out an online application and also send a cover letter and résumé. Richard reviews this information, interviews the student by phone and also talks with their college advisors.

"We like to see some experience in agriculture but don't require it," he says.

The ranch offers four internships per year for three months at a time. Experiences depend on

the ranching season. The IX calves out about 500 first-calf heifers, some 400 second-calf heifers and 2,000 older cows.

From animal husbandry to range and water management, and from stock water development to animal health, horseshoeing, fencing and hay equipment operation, students have a chance to learn, do and perfect it all, Richard says.

"We consider ourselves — my dad likes to use the term — 'blue-ribbon,' so we try to do things very well," he explains. "We follow best management practices, and we're Beef Quality Assurance (BQA)-certified. We incorporate that into the internship and show these kids how to drive a tractor correctly, how to fix good fence. This internship isn't just about learning but about doing things the correct way."

The IX has checks and balances in place. Everyone on the ranch follows standard operating procedures so work is carried out the same way at the four ranch locations.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF IX RANCH CO.

► Interns learn hands-on how to band and brand calves at the IX Ranch Co.

Internship program considerations

Here are some things to consider when developing a ranch internship program. These practices are in place on the Prather Ranch and the IX Ranch Co. For more information on the Prather and IX ranches, visit www.pratherranch.com and www.ixranch.com, or contact Prather Ranch's Mary Rickert or the IX's Richard Roth directly.

- Have one person coordinate and be the contact for the internship program.
- Formalize the program. Write down on paper and show in photos what students will do. College advisors want to know. Formalize an application; if possible, make it available online. Follow college semesters.
- Get the word out. Use word of mouth, a web site, correspondence with agricultural universities, university career days or National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) career day.
- Select quality candidates. Ask for the application back with a cover letter and résumé. Interview students by phone, and visit with their college advisors.
- Spell out internship objectives. (See the "IX Ranch Co.'s internship objectives.")
- Draft an intern employee manual. Include what interns should bring, housing arrangements, vehicle, work and pay policies, and maps of the operation. This could also include the ranch's standard operating procedures (SOPs) on how to build fence, drive a tractor, etc.
- Draw up guidelines for employees who will supervise interns. Determine responsibilities of the ranch and responsibilities of the student.
- Draft an intern employee evaluation form. Consider weekly or bi-weekly reviews.

Interns also keep a daily work log and are evaluated by their managers weekly.

“We have an evaluation form, which basically gives them a letter grade on everything from punctuality to attitude,” Richard explains. “We have some pretty tough teachers. Here you start with an F and you work up from there. We’re not very gracious about giving out A’s.”

“Work on the IX is real-world. These interns learn how to work as a team, get along with many different personalities, learn life skills (change oil and tires and take care of animals). They learn what work is like and the importance of doing a good job.”

The IX is also conscious to include interns as different opportunities arise, for example, in monthly staff meetings. “If a student is focused on animal husbandry, equipment or horsemanship, we try to take the necessary steps to see that they get a more in-depth understanding of why we do things the way we do them,” Richard says.

Ranch managers and foremen coach the interns. While it can be frustrating at times, Richard believes the managers actually enjoy it. “It does make life interesting, there’s no doubt about it.

“It’s invigorating for those of us who live and work here to have a young crew who’s learning — heck, we probably learn as much from them as they learn from us,” Richard comments.

He does admit that it’s a “huge risk” for the IX to offer internships to students with very little experience. “They’re on high-priced equipment, high-priced horses and they have to go out and be basically like everyone else.”

On the other hand, “It’s a great way for us to get help for throughout the year.” Plus, it helps ranch managers hone management skills and gain perspectives from other viewpoints.

“Interns who have gone on to work for us have adapted well and have been used to train other interns,” he reports. He’s written many letters of reference and knows that others are getting jobs.

The IX expects interns to learn and be self-sufficient and to think on their own. “Even though we hire interns that may not know much at first, we would like to think we are training them to be leaders,” Richard concludes.



►Left: IX Ranch Co. interns take part in all ranching activities, including building fence.

►Below: Interns who already know how to ride benefit on the IX Ranch, where many summer and fall days are spent in the saddle gathering and moving pairs.



IX Ranch Co.’s internship objectives

The objectives of the internship are to provide students with opportunities:

- to learn about the occupation of their choice through work experience;
- to test occupational career aspirations;
- to develop a more mature attitude toward their academic and professional preparation;
- to relate classroom instruction to occupational goals;
- to experience situations that cannot be provided in the classroom;
- to operate equipment that may not be available in the university laboratories;
- to acquire experiences gained through business-customer and employer-employee relationships;
- to develop personal qualities such as neatness, politeness, courtesy and concern for colleagues and clientele; and
- to develop skills related to the process of gaining employment (e.g. résumé writing, interviewing, etc.).