

FEATURED

IX Ranch manages stewardship, students, steers

By SUE ROESLER, The Prairie Star

Mar 16, 2020



A beautiful day for shipping calves at the IX Ranch.

BIG SANDY, Mont. - The kind of partnering with education that leads to real world success is built into the IX Ranch's operation.

The IX Ranch in Montana partners with agriculture schools in the state and around the world, offering ag students and others the skilled, hands-on training they couldn't receive in a classroom.

“Some of the greatest things about the agriculture industry are the tradition, legacy, heritage, and philosophy to be sustainable,” said Richard Roth, one of the owners of the unique ranch, who oversees day-to-day operations. “We want to leave the land and resources better than before so future generations can enjoy the bounties and be proud of what it represents. We have to be in it for the long haul.”

With that in mind, when Roth returned to the ranch in 2002, he contacted different universities around the country, both two-and-four-year. Not all were ag colleges – but he let them all know there was an opportunity to learn waiting at the ranch for students who were interested in pursuing careers in agriculture.

The IX Ranch has been involved in providing internships - and out-of-the-classroom real ranch learning - for 17 years.

“It wasn’t just an internship to work at the ranch. We wanted more for the students, so I set up a curriculum for them. As an intern, sure, they will work, but it will also be an experience,” Roth said.

“While the interns would be shoveling the barn, fencing, riding, getting their hands on a cow, learning how to give medicine through proper Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) injection sites, I told these universities that they would be learning from top-notch ranch managers. The more I talked about that, it just took off.”

The ranch started getting a following on Facebook, and students came from everywhere.

“I was looking for fresh minds that wanted to learn, and were willing to say, ‘I will do it your way,’” he said. “When we first started, some had never driven a stick shift, and some had never ridden a horse. One girl that came early on had never been on a ranch, and she ended up going on to be an attorney in a big city.”

Today, the IX works with all the ag universities in the state. Roth serves on the advisory board of MSU-Northern and MSU-Northern Ag Research Center, because it is the nearest to the ranch.

“Last year, we had several businesses and universities come through and visit our ranch. Ag classes and their instructors also come through to see how we do certain operations,” Roth said.

In addition, the IX Ranch and the National Cattleman’s Beef Association partnered with Art of the Cowgirl to provide three internships on the ranch.

The ranch landscape

The IX Ranch, with ownership dating back to the 1800s, is truly a rolling hill plains country ranch with cattle grazing nutritious and tall native prairie grasses in the diverse environment ringed by rugged bluffs, scattered shelterbelts, long valleys, hay fields with pivots, and deep creeks located on the southern edge of the Bear Paw Mountains.

Roth and his wife, Jeri, have a daughter, Jessica, and three sons, Brock, Ryan and Parker.

Roth received a business degree from the University of Montana in Missoula, while the rest of his family went to Montana State University. That still makes him laugh.

The family – along with a large crew - manage around 3,500 head of commercial Red and Black Angus.

Using Leachman genetics

Their bulls come from Leachman Cattle of Colorado.

“All our genetics are from Leachman. Leachman bulls are called Composite Bulls because they are a composite of British and Continental breeds that carry traits most suitable to our environment, and produce females that are good mothers, moderate in size, have good udder composition and longevity,” Roth said.

“I love Leachman genetics. I am not so much set on one breed. I am trying to find the perfect bull that creates the perfect cow that fits our environment.”

The IX Ranch runs 180 bulls as herd bulls. They need to be the perfect bulls for the environment, because the cowherd is bred 100 percent naturally every year.

Every year, Roth gathers his list of about 200 bulls that will fit the needs of the herd, and flies down to the sale, where he bids on the bulls.

“I select from 30-40 bulls every year to cycle through the herd,” he said.

Moderate-sized cows

For cows, Roth wants a moderate-sized efficient cow, weighing 1,200-1,250 pounds. With this size of cows, he can raise more beef on the same pasture than if he had larger-sized cows.

It is a ranch built on success: each of their efficient cows must breed every year, and produce a 600-pound calf, which is “perfect for our geographic location.”

“My job is to have a calf get on the truck every fall, so I am very finicky about udders,” Roth said. “When I pick our replacement heifers, they need to be able to stand still under a little pressure in the alley, or they go down the road. I want good, calm cows. After all, these future mothers are the ones who create the herd and good quality feeder steers and heifers to sell.”

Around Nov. 15, the ranch preg-checks their heifers/cows. Last year, they preg-checked 3,754, and had an overall ranch pregnancy rate of 93.2 percent.

Replacement heifers were pasture bred for 45 days, while the cows were bred for 58 days.

Most of the time, open cows are immediately shipped off-ranch to market, but in 2019, all open cows were left with bulls and retested in late November.

Cows that tested ‘bred’ were sold at a premium over open feeder cows.

“I didn’t have to buy any bulls, so it was a good opportunity for us,” he said.

MSU-Northern ag students visit

When it came time to preg-test in October, Roth invited ag students from Montana State University-Northern’s range livestock production class to come and watch the group of 800 cows be tested for pregnancy through ultrasounding.

Brianna Bernhardt, MSU-Northern’s ag tech assistant professor, said the students learned so much from watching the ultrasounding and seeing how IX handles their cattle in a stress-free way.

“The students were surprised to hear how closely managed calving was on such a large operation,” Bernhardt said. “They learned a lot from being at the IX Ranch.”

Stress-free handling

At the IX Ranch, one of the main philosophies everyone follows when they do any work with the cattle is to handle the animals in a calm, stress-free way.

“We are science-based and progressive, which makes our operation good for student education,” Roth said. “We use stress-free handling techniques from folks like Temple Grandin or Bud Williams, and we take these scientifically-proven techniques and apply them on the ranch.”

With their ranch management, Roth said they maintain the natural resources, such as the soil, the water, and the land, in a way that mirrors what Mother Nature intended.

Grazing management on the ranch

The Roths have been good stewards of the land.

“We have been true conservationists and that is what guides our ranch management,” he said. Grazing is a major part of the IX soil health program.

“My grandfather’s philosophy was to take half and leave half,” Roth said. “When we graze our pastures, the intent is to leave half, because we’re always cognizant of drought and the need to follow a drought mitigation mode.”

The IX Ranch runs their herd through the Bear Paws, and within the native pastures on the bluffs and valleys running through the prairie ranch.

By June, if the ranch’s pastures haven’t received a certain level of precipitation, the older cows are the first to go.

“We will always downsize cows, not the grass, if we have a drought. If you wreck the land one year, it could take 20 years to get it back,” he said. “And you can always buy cows back.”

Their herd grazes the grass pastures starting around April 1, with free mineral/salt always available, and plenty of clean water from creeks that run through the ranch.

How do they know their natural resources are in good or better condition than years previously?

They have 13 sites they document every year with photos – the same site, the same parameters to taking the photos, each and every year.

The IX also uses a software program called Ranchlogs, which uses math and science to accurately manage livestock inventory and grazing resources.

The program was initially developed by one of the ranch owners back in the mid-1980s. Roth took ownership of the program in 2007, when it needed to be upgraded.

“Since then, I’ve maintained the program and continued to improve upon its ability to help manage livestock and grazing lands throughout the ranch,” he said.

The IX grazes the herd until around Jan. 1, as the Roths raise hardy cows that can dig through the snow to find blades of grass. But as snow gets hard and deep, they will begin feeding hay - from Jan. 1 to around the end of February or mid-March.

“We feed hay - about 8/10ths of a ton per head over the course of a feeding season,” he said.

The IX Ranch puts up 6-7,000 tons of round bales of grass, grass/hay, grass/alfalfa mix and some hay barley in the summer, getting two cuttings under irrigation. The round bales are then hauled and stacked for winter feeding.

“By mid-March, we have warmed up enough, and we like to see our cows in a 5.5 to a 5.7 or even 6, body condition - that is the perfect condition for them to be in going into calving,” he said.

Pasture calving

The first-calf heifers start calving on March 1 and cows start April 1.

“We do all pasture calving but we have a calving barn set up for our first-calf heifers. It is old but we have kept it in good shape,” he said. “We try to let them birth as natural as possible out on pasture, but we have the barn if needed.”

They break their calving down into two cycles.

The first-cycle heifers calve first and the second cycle heifers calve 30 days later.

“The second cyclers are sorted off and kept in different pastures where they are still fed but not watched as carefully. This allows for better management of the cows, that are calving in the first cycle,” Roth said.

Steer calves out of the first-cycle cows are a “very uniform group” to sell, which helps in marketing. Roth will sell about 1,000 steers from this group in October.

The second-cycle steer calves go to a feedlot in Edgar, called Centana, where the calves are on a yearly program, and are sold in February.

All 1,400-1,600 heifer calves are also shipped to the feedlot. Rich goes down and sorts out his replacement heifers from there.

“The feedlot gives me options to sort for replacement calves for our herd, and to be able to use a whole new marketing time of year to sell in,” he said. “It just works really great for us.”

Another philosophy of the ranch is that “we want to be the factory,” Roth said. He said he “is very blessed to have the staff to do it, including the interns they hire every year.”

“We are really good at calving cows, really good at running cows, so all the second-cycle steer calves and all the heifers calves go to the feedlot in September. That allows us more room and hay to run more cows,” he said. “Our objective is to run and maintain 3,500 mother cows.”

Almost all the cattle work is done on horseback, with the exception of some drifting or gathering of cattle at times with motorized vehicles. All corral or sorting work is done on horseback. While IX has the motorized vehicles, they find horseback works the best to handle cattle.

Ranch history, legacy

The legacy of the ranch began with the North Montana Cattle Company in the 1880s. With most of the same owners involved, it became known as the McNamara & Marlow Ranch in the 1890s, after Cornelius John McNamara and Thomas Marlow.

The two owned many properties and businesses in Big Sandy and Butte, and imported sheep to the ranch, according to Roth.

In 1955, Roth's grandparents, Arthur Jr. and Audrey Roth, and their good friends, Bill and Pinky Lang, purchased the ranch. Mr. and Mrs. Lang were the money behind the ranch, and Arthur and Audrey, were the managers.

"Our side of the family has always been managers of the ranch, and we've been owners, too," Roth said.

Stephen and Karen Roth later took over managing the ranch. Stephen (who is Richard Roth's dad) was Montana Stockgrowers Association president in 2007. Richard is also a member of the Stockgrowers, among many other organizations.

Cow/Calf Beef Quality Assurance

This year, the IX Ranch received the 2020 Cow/Calf Beef Quality Assurance award at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association convention in San Antonio, Texas.

"We have a great crew who are committed to 'doing it right' and we could not do it without them. Thank you NCBA and BQA for recognizing all cattle producers who work so hard to produce the highest quality product for the consumer," Roth said as he accepted the award.

The IX Ranch has a long history, more than a century and a quarter of rich ranch legacy to pass down to its next generation – and the generations following.

For more, see the IX Ranch's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/IX-Ranch-Company-225238104186059/>.