



The crew at Sieben Live Stock Co., Cascade, Mont., focuses on operating the ranch to meet goals for their bottom line while preserving the Western rangelands for the next generation.

Story and photos by
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The winter hats are hung and the boots rest in melting snow puddles by the door. The only noise to be heard is the clanking of dishes, a raspy cough here and there, and the cook, who announces the dinner selections.

The main course is followed by a choice of two desserts, and as the last bite of cake is devoured, the youngest members of the cow crew are out the door, ready for the rest of the day's work. Only the ranch foreman, a couple of the oldest cowhands and the ranch owner sit, discussing how the cows will be culled and what numbers are needed to help make a profitable bottom line for the next year.

You might picture a similar scene at your local mom-and-pop café, but on the north slope of the Big Belt Mountains that surround the Chestnut Valley there isn't a café in sight. Sieben Live Stock Co. is the end of the road, located some 30 miles from Cascade, Mont., the closest town, which has a population of only 730. And the cook, June, welcomes the boys to the ranch cookhouse for the noon meal.

Once you enter the ranch gate it's a whole new world. The county no longer maintains the roads. The Sieben crew takes over from there, using a gravel pit located on the ranch. Mile after mile of ranch roads exist.

As the main road winds around hills and mountain cliffs to the ranch headquarters, small homesteads where the married cowhands live are the only signs of human life that interrupt the serenity of mule deer, antelope and the black cattle that graze through the crusted snow.

At Sieben Live Stock Co., the balance to be found isn't between city and government nor between friends and foes, but among the land, the cattle, the sheep and the wildlife. The ranch seems somewhat removed from the societal problems that exist throughout the world today.

"One of the biggest sociological problems that we have had in the last 10 years has been four-wheelers ver-

Chase Hibbard, owner of Sieben Live Stock Co., worked with Gus Hormay, the father of rest-rotation grazing, to put a considerable amount of the ranch into a rest-rotation system. The ranch also has a deferred grazing system, as well as a short-duration, high-density system.



Chase Hibbard — along with two other great-grandsons of Henry Sieben — represents the fourth generation to own the family ranch. Balancing management techniques with the natural ecosystem helped Sieben Live Stock Co. win the 2003 National Cattlemen's Beef Association Region V Environmental Stewardship Award.



Hibbard was one of the founders of the Devil's Kitchen Management Team, a group of cattlemen and others who work together to preserve the wildlife.

sus horses," Chase Hibbard, ranch owner, says laughing. "Half the crew appreciates and prefers using four-wheelers for much of the cattle work. The other half of the crew does not appreciate four-wheelers at all around cattle. It has been a real challenge working out that one. Guess what, the horses won, only because I dictated that they were going to win.

"The ranch foreman sees the time savings and the utility in using four-wheelers. Most cowboys on the crew feel that horses are more effective and more congruous with working livestock in a fashion in which they should be worked."

It's that same philosophy — balancing management techniques with the natural ecosystem — that helped Sieben Live Stock Co. win the 2003 National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Region V Environmental Stewardship Award after being nominated by the Montana Stockgrowers Association (MSGA).

Ranch history

Hibbard says he evolved into ranching and caring for the land naturally. His great-grandfather, Henry Sieben, settled in the Chesnut Valley in the late 1800s. It was a time when ranchers could secure water rights on streams and control vast acres of land, he says. But his great-grandfather saw that the land was severely overgrazed in the valley.

Henry may have been ahead of his time in recognizing the need for healthy land and for grazing practices that would leave the land as good as, or better than, it had been. He decided he would leave the valley in search of land in less disrepair, which he found in central Montana near Flat Willow Creek. His intentions, however, were to someday have the money to return to the valley and purchase the Hole in the Wall, also known as the Cannon Sheep and Cattle Co., to ranch in his beloved Chesnut Valley.

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There are very few ranches like Sieben where cattle and sheep still graze the mountain ranges together. Western natives will tell you the West was once dotted like a patchwork quilt by monstrous sheep-and-cattle ranches. Modern times, however, have dispensed with many of the traditional ranching practices, such as running sheep and cattle together on the same open range.



Henry found success and was able to return. He established Sieben Live Stock Co. in 1907. The family's fourth generation — Chase Hibbard and two other great-grandsons — own the ranch today.

Ranching has changed over the last century, but Sieben hasn't strayed far from the original stewardship philosophies that Henry established years ago. Today, the ranch is approximately 85% cattle and 15% sheep. Sieben's Angus-based cows are bred to Angus bulls that are generally purchased from purebred breeders in Montana. The sheep are Targhee and are raised for both wool and meat.

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—Chase Hibbard

Listening to the land

The transition from one generation to the next with the goal to continue improving the ranch has taught Hibbard the importance of listening to the land for management cues. He says the history of overgrazing nearly a century before and what he was seeing with his own eyes told him that traditional grazing practices would not be sustainable.

When Hibbard took over the ranch in 1976, he says his concern was making it work — leaving the ranch in good enough shape financially that it could be passed on to the next generation. To do this, he began investigating various grazing practices, knowing that quality rangeland would be the backbone of a sustainable ranching entity.

He says working with Gus Hormay, the father of rest-rotation grazing, allowed him to put a considerable amount of the ranch in a rest-rotation system. The ranch also has a deferred grazing system, as well as a short-duration, high-density system.

“My overall goal, which was established early on, was to leave the ranch a better place at the end of my watch than at the beginning,” Hibbard says. “A rotational grazing scheme was the first major step in that direction.

“The proof has been in the pudding on that one,” he says, acknowledging that their survival through several years of drought can be attributed to their grazing practices.

“We've had three years of drought. That was pretty tough on us, but the rest-rotation fields held up incredibly well,” he says. “It was amazing to see how the root reserves had stored enough carbohydrates that we had excellent grass all

the way through the drought in our rotation fields.”

The ranch management plan included many other environmentally friendly practices. Water development would not only benefit the rangeland, cattle, sheep and wildlife, but also the human inhabitants of the land.

“Broader development of water was the next step. For sound ranching reasons, it improves livestock distribution and allows you to improve pasture utilization. But there are several other larger benefits to water development,” Hibbard says. Pulling cattle away from riparian areas contributes to water quality and quantity, which, he says, has obvious public benefits.

“That, in conjunction with rest-rotation, heals bare ground and improves quantity and quality of the forage out there,” he adds. “You are improving water filtration, water retention and also contributing to water quality and water quantity.”

Multispecies grazing

A drive down the ranch’s Middle Creek road provides a sight that is rarely seen. In a swath of snow-covered land more than 100 feet (ft.) across lay the little hoof prints of a band of 800 Targhee sheep. The band moved together as they shuffled their noses through inches of snow in search of the forage below.

There are very few ranches like Sieben where cattle and sheep still graze the mountain ranges together. Western natives will tell you the West was once dotted like a patchwork quilt by monstrous sheep-and-cattle ranches. Modern times, however, have dispensed with many of the traditional ranching practices, such as running sheep and cattle together on the same open range. But cattle, sheep, wildlife and the open range still complement one another on the Sieben ranch.

Multispecies grazing has allowed the rangelands on Sieben to benefit from multiplant consumption, keeping weeds out and allowing all of the natural forages to excel. Two classes of cattle — cow-calf pairs and yearlings — run on the land with the sheep. Hibbard says, “They complement each other quite well, to the benefit of the range.”

Hibbard says the cattle generally prefer the coarser, taller grasses at lower elevations. Sheep prefer the shorter, tender grasses, forbs and weeds at higher elevations.

“By using the two in conjunction with one another, we get greater range utilization and more uniform grazing of all species, which prevents a bias to some grass and forb species over others,” he says. “Frequently, range that is grazed by cattle only will become heavy in forbs. If you graze sheep there as well, the forbs and grasses will be in better balance.”

“There are great benefits to that. It’s good for the ranch in that we get more efficient utilization. We harvest more AUMs (animal unit months) per acre, but we are also grazing uniformly, which

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Hibbard says his operation is a grass farm, not a hay farm. Sieben Live Stock does have some irrigated grassland and they do some haying, but it is up to the cows to gather the grass. Hibbard uses two classes of cattle as well as sheep to graze the rangeland, keeping the plants healthy and flourishing.

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has long-term ecological benefits for the grass and for the range. And with that, in conjunction with rest, we feel we are creating a healthier range every year," Hibbard adds

Top of the road

Sieben has the good fortune of being at the top of the road, Hibbard says, when it comes to controlling

weeds. He says they don't have the invasive weed problems that other locations around the state experience, but controlling weeds is still on his list of environmental stewardship practices.

"We use a multifaceted approach to weed management. We do some animal grazing, but we mostly combine chemical control, which is gen-

erally spot-specific, with a well-equipped four-wheeler," he says. "For the last few years we've released bugs, which attack the root systems and the seedheads; and we are seeing some tremendous success."

Weed management is also enhanced by keeping the biodiversity thriving on the rangeland.

"Livestock have their favorite plants. Out of 15 or 20 plants out there, two or three of them will be favorites — they will be the ice cream.

Those are the ones that they go to and graze them repeatedly every year. The plant never has an opportunity to restore its root reserves, eventually dies and is replaced by a tap-rooted weed or a less desirable plant," Hibbard points out. By resting the land and grazing different species of animals, that balance is kept in check.

Sieben also controls tree growth by utilizing selective logging for the purpose of fire control, clearing un-

Calving in tune with Mother Nature

Sieben Live Stock Co. owner Chase Hibbard and his crew made a big decision last fall when they decided to move their calving time from February and March to May and June.

"When I first mentioned it, they wondered how hard I hit my head when I fell out of the back of the truck," Hibbard says. "But as people thought about it more, talked about it more, it began to make more sense. I think there's a built-in fear of change, which is legitimate."

That fear was eased by the entire ranch crew's evaluation of the situation, with everyone's voice being heard.

"You work for years building a successful system of calving and livestock management," he says. "You gear your facilities to it. You gear your thought process to it. You gear your entire work year to it, and it's hard to change that."

The move to an average May 25 calving date was made to be more congruous with range productivity and cow-herd needs. "A system where we could feed less hay over the winter and let Mother Nature do the work in early spring with grass green-up at the time of calving began to look better," Hibbard says of the ranch that has been going through an extended drought. Wintering on less hay and calving virtually unassisted on grass were the greatest perceived benefits, he says.

Hibbard became interested

Right: Hibbard and his crew made a big decision last fall when they decided to move their calving time from February and March to May and June. The steer calves weaned healthy in November and averaged 450 pounds. Hibbard says the results have been promising thus far.



"The crew definitely shares the ranch goals for stewardship. Most practices are discussed in depth with the ranch foreman and crew before we embark upon them, and we generally have concurrence and support from the crew in what we are trying to accomplish," says Chase Hibbard, owner of Sieben Live Stock Co. The cattle crew is made up of about a dozen cowboys, who spend most of their time managing the cattle.



in a later calving date when he attended a Dick Diven's school in Red Deer, Alta., Canada. He recalls Diven's pulling out a chart that

overlaid a cow's nutritional requirements with the range's ability to provide it. He also heard a story at a ranching-for-profit school about a rancher who weaned 600-pound (lb.) calves and 400-lb. calves and wintered them on the same amount of hay. As yearlings, the 400-lb. calves were just as heavy as the 600-lb. calves. He knew that if he had calves that would put on more weight per day of age (WDA) at a lower feed cost, he would add profit to his bottom line.

Sieben's first bunch of May and June calves were weaned in November. The weaned steer calves weighed an average of 450 lb. The crew has only doctored a handful, and the calves are back out on winter stockpile, harvesting the forage themselves, Hibbard reports. The cows returned to winter grazing land as well and won't be brought back in until mid-January. Hibbard will run the calves as stockers next spring, hoping for a good compensatory gain after they come off the minimal winter feed.

Hibbard says time will tell him a lot more about the decisions he has made. For now, he says, "I can conclude at this point that later calving is more efficient. I hope to use the resource that previously went to feeding that cow and calf over winter to some other more productive end, be it maintaining or putting gain on stockers or not harvesting hay and having it available to be grazed."

derstory and removing genetically inferior trees to leave the very best standing.

“By removing a lot of the junk we are freeing up the better trees to grow more rapidly and to be available for the future,” Hibbard says. “And by thinning in critical areas we are improving our chances of being effective in controlling fire.”

Fire is inevitable, he says. It is an integral part of the ecosystem in his region. Sacrificing some short-term profit for the long term by logging in this manner will more than pay for itself, he says.

The game plan

The Devil’s Kitchen Management Team may seem like an odd name for a group of cattlemen to join, but Hibbard was one of the founders of this team 15 years ago. It is composed of wildlife agency, forest service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) officials, along with sportsmen and a group of neighboring landowners. The group gathers around the “kitchen table” to listen to each other’s ideas and needs for preserving and controlling wildlife.

“Through this group we set goals for the area, focusing primarily on game management. As a result, we have been able to collaboratively manage a much larger area to everyone’s benefit,” Hibbard says. Through “a controlled expansion of the game herd, elk wintering on private lands, we have produced a greater quantity of larger bulls and we have taken a lot of the onerous hunter management away from private landowners by using the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks block management program to manage hunters.

“We use a consensus, a collaborative approach, and we are 100% behind an idea or we don’t go forward with it,” he says. It has allowed Sieben and other ranches to do some limited outfitting through taking in some outside hunters. “This management scheme has produced a greater quantity of big bulls, which helps us diversify ranch income,” he adds.

Even though the winding roads to the ranch headquarters may feel like they lead to the end of the earth, Hibbard acknowledges that Sieben is an integral part of a ranching community. He manages his ranch practices for the benefit of the entire public by listening to the simple things.

“Everybody does things a little differently,” he says. “Each ranch has evolved around its strengths, and even though we are all in the same community, the difference between the neighboring ranch and our ranch is like night and day.”



After the calves were weaned this fall, they returned to stockpiled orchard grass and some native rangeland. Hibbard plans on grazing the calves this summer and then selling them as feeder calves.



Editor’s Note: *The national winner of the NCBA Environmental Stewardship Program (ESAP) was scheduled to be announced at the Cattle Industry Annual Convention and Trade Show Saturday, Feb. 1, in Nashville, Tenn. To find out more about the other regional winners and who won the national title, visit the real-time coverage of the event provided by Angus Productions Inc. (API) at www.4cattlemen.com.*