

The cows are there to shape the landscape, but they must make a profit while doing it.

POWER IN NUMBERS, RELATIONSHIPS

Separate cattle operations graze together, sell calves as one.

Story by *Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor*

Bill and Laurie Lickley were just looking for more feed for their cows.

Hauling the herd between summer and winter locations and feeding hay wasn't a business model they felt like they could keep up long-term, so they were looking for other opportunities.

They did find pastures, but they gained a whole lot more, says Bill Lickley.

When the family sent their herd nearly five hours away from their Jerome, Idaho, ranch to northern Nevada, they had no idea it would turn into a 12-year friendship and working relationship. It's one that led to a deeper understanding of grass management and improved marketability of their calves through economies of scale.

It was a bit unexpected, and came a little bit at a time; but the Lickleys now spend so much time looking

forward that they don't reflect too often on how they got to where they are.

The partnership

When Jesse and Ricarda Braatz had the opportunity to lease Squaw Valley Ranch, an extensive high-desert operation near Golconda, Nev., they managed a combination of cows and yearlings. As the right stockers started to become harder to procure, they decided to increase cow numbers quickly.

"Through random connections we just started talking to people about



PHOTOS BY MAGGIE MALSON

Bill Lickley (left) found partnering with Ricarda and Jesse Braatz (right) yielded a lot more than just grass for his cow herd. They've swapped knowledge and become good friends. They've learned that as the ranch grows and changes, the partnership will evolve, too.

bringing cows here," says Jesse.

The Lickleys were the first to seem like the right fit.

"We were open to the idea," Jesse says. "I don't know that we had a set of parameters, but we were fairly

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cautious about what that could mean.”

Three different partners brought cows that first year. Counting their own, four separate herds grazed as one on the ranch — emphasis on “as one.”

“It’s range and riparian management. It’s pasture management and operating the landscape as a whole as much as we can,” Jesse says. “The fewer number of herds, the more recovery you get in your system, and the recovery is where everything happens.”

The cows are there to shape the landscape, but they must make a profit while doing it. Pooling together calves and swapping expertise has increased the latter, although it took a few years to get that in perfect step.

Branding on shares

“Initially they were selling their calves, we were selling our calves, and it didn’t take too long to figure out we could do better as a larger number of calves, with more and more attractive products to sell,” Lickley says. “It was a chance to have a better sort on them and just more numbers.”

Soon the pairing up of calves at branding gave way to branding on a percentage share.

“It’s kind of evolved from four different directions to thinking of them as one big herd that we can find the best market for each class of cattle,” says Lickley, who often takes the marketing lead.

“If it was just me, I’d maybe have a gooseneck load of [a particular class] to sell,” he observes.

Now they can separate heifer

calves from steers, and open heifers from cull cows. Since they’re not keeping track of whose is whose, the logistics are smoother.

“That was not something we talked about or thought about for two weeks and then implemented,” Jesse says.

The idea came up several years before it was adopted.

“The real advantage is scale,” he notes.

Typically, the market for their type of cattle is set at summer video sales, Lickley says.

“For quite a few years, we would have to make a pretty quick decision there into July what price was good enough and then barter within maybe a couple-hour time frame,” Lickley says.

After a few years of tracking basis, he found a consistent link to the

November feeder-cattle board.

“Just having that information has kind of allowed us to start marketing conversations and planning way earlier,” he says.

They talk about costs at the beginning of the year, figure in breed up and weaning percentage, and then try to set a target number.

“Once we all get in agreement there, then basically that or better and it’s going to be okay,” Lickley says.

Figuring out the timing of the sale is part of it, but having increasingly better calves to sell is certainly another, he says.

Keying on uniformity

Several herds in one meant merging mixed genetics, philosophies and goals.

“We really focus on not having to pour a lot of money into the cattle,”



The separate cow herds are now more Angus and more uniform as a whole. They must work on rough range and winter out on their own, Ricarda notes. Having a live calf, good udders and moderate milk are important traits.

Ricarda says. “We winter out, which is different from a lot of other ranches around here and then having a live calf is huge.”

Udders are important, along with moderate milk. They sell a lighter

calf, which gives the buyers flexibility, Ricarda says. They already knew the type of cattle that would fit their environment. Now they’re working to fine-tune which cattle fit that and best fit the market. Seeing which ones are sorted off at auction gives clues.

“We’ll say, ‘Well, I just got beat up on that guy. So, how do we not sell too many of those?’ So, we’ve made progress,” Lickley says. “You see what gets cut back, and it’s the colors and those phenotypes.”

The partners — now down to three — pick bulls together from two or three seedstock suppliers and have moved to an increasingly Angus base. They try to buy some half-siblings and will increase consistency with culling.

“From a production standpoint,

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it's taken seven or eight years to where the cattle themselves started to look like one herd, but they are starting to look like each other now," Lickley says. "We're just trying to get that uniformity to where we want it."

Building on strengths

Any big decisions — like genetics and marketing — are made as a group. They lean on each other's strengths and teach each other along the way.

"It's probably easier for me to stay up to date with the market and just kind of the big-picture stuff, because I'm not having to worry about water lines breaking and what field we're going to next," Lickley

says. "I can glean through some of the information and keep forwarding that on, and then Jesse is good about challenging my assumptions, which is very helpful."

Lickley says he's more in-tune with grass management in tandem with cow management.

"Just having more people to brainstorm with and solve problems with has been a huge advantage," Jesse says.

Ricarda manages the books, which include a complicated set of calculations to figure expenses per share of cows and then being sure to charge or credit everyone back the correct share.

"That is super critical, and Ricarda does a fabulous job. You can't

imagine how complicated it gets when you do something as simple as buy a load of cake to supplement some cows," Lickley explains.

They've learned what works and what doesn't, and that as the ranch grows and changes, the partnership will evolve, too.

One thing seems to be certain: "Bill and Laurie are now part of the family, and they're going to stay just because they bring so much value, and it's been such a great experience," Jesse says.

What started as filling a need — for feed for one rancher, and for graziers for another — has turned into a relationship that's focused on everyone getting better year after year. |

Pros at partnership

"Ricarda [Braatz] grew up working with other ranchers kind of her entire life, and we are pretty flexible," Jesse Braatz says.

The idea of partnership wasn't as scary to them as it might be to some. However, they still learned a lot along the way. Here is their list of tips:

► **COMMUNICATION.** In the beginning all partners tried to meet at least once a year in person. Now they may rely on phone calls more often, but they still try to over-communicate.

"I say it daily, 'I know we talked about this, but I just want to reiterate,'" Bill Lickley says. By now, they know it's not a sign of mistrust. "If I ask a question, I'm not pushing you. I just want to be sure we get this tied down before we get too far down the road."

► **TRUST.** Lickley used to visit the ranch every month. Now he comes down more often in the busy seasons and less often at other points. There's no need to be there all the time.

"The first year, you're really working your tail off to earn

trust," Jesse remembers. It's not that they do anything differently now, but they don't feel the pressure in the same way.

► **DEFINED DETAILS.** Document everything simply to keep it straight, Lickley says, noting that Ricarda's complicated Excel® spreadsheet makes their working relationship tick. Early on, they found that having Jesse and Ricarda front all the bills and wait for a check in the mail wasn't the best plan.

"That worked for about two weeks, because that was way too slow," Jesse says.

They adjusted and each put some money in a joint holding account, which is still how they work operating expenses today. That's just one example of the many details something like this requires, they say.

► **CHECK YOUR MOTIVATION.** "Be honest about whether you can be a little bit more flexible to things. Then, also ask yourself, 'Why?'" Jesse says. Knowing your "why" is important, he adds.

Communication is key to making any partnership work, Lickley says.

