

CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF  
2021 SUSTAINABILITY AWARD



When Mary Lou Bradley and husband James Henderson returned to Bradley 3 Ranch in the early 2000s, they made a plan to develop water and manage range with a big-picture view. They earned national recognition for those efforts this year.

PHOTO BY GRANT COMPANY

# WATERING A WASTELAND

## Texas' B3R manages grazing, water, cattle to provide sustainable ranching enterprise.

Story & photo by Abbie Lankitus, *Certified Angus Beef*

**T**his is living the dream," says Mary Lou Bradley-Henderson. "You can't go wrong when it rains every other day. Not in this country."

If going through bad years makes one appreciate the good, Mary Lou, husband James Henderson and mother Minnie Lou Bradley, all of Bradley 3 Ranch (B3R), Childress, Texas, have plenty of reason to be thankful.

More than 65 years ago, the ranch was considered a wasteland when B3R's matriarch arrived.

"I didn't know until later," Minnie Lou recalls, "but no one had ever owned this piece of country for over 10 years without going broke."

She might have taken the same path had a friend not challenged her grass management. They were

understocking, but overgrazing. The cattle cherry-picked the good stuff, leaving space for water-sucking mesquite trees and redberry juniper to steal the land.

Minnie Lou implemented a rotational grazing plan and strapped GPS collars to her cows to find the grazing paths. She learned every pasture is different, and distinguishing grazeable acreage from total acreage per cow is challenging.

When Mary Lou and James returned to the ranch in the early 2000s, they mapped out a 20-year plan to ensure water was no more than a half mile from any point.

On the itinerary: Build more opportunities for water, gouge out the scourge of brush one by one, and bring back the grass while managing a quality-forward seedstock business.

The fruits of their labor are evident, and Certified Angus Beef (CAB) honored the trio with its 2021 Sustainability Award.

### Soaking it in

Water is the elixir to life in these parts. Droughts are not an *if*, but a *when*, and James and Mary Lou do their best to prepare. However, the record drought of 2010-2014 changed everything.

There were 100 days over 100° F, and 45 over 110°, recalls Mary Lou. "Droughts like that are mind games, because you're defeated

financially and defeated on what to do."

They thought they had a drought contingency plan, says James, "but we didn't have enough of anything — grass, hay or money."

In 2015, the trio gathered around their dispersal plans.

"I just thought it was our time," says Mary Lou.

They were rained out overnight. "Okay, I hear You," she says. "We're not done."

They formed a new plan. First, they began investing in stock tanks (a Texan term for ponds). It takes one dry year to remove brush and dig the pond, and another nine for the rain to soak the ground, find equilibrium and begin filling.

It's what they did for the 20-foot-deep tank just down the hill from their homes. As a result, water that would normally flow into the Red River is now stored for cattle.

A 10-year process became one as a single night's rain in June filled the 2020 pond to the brim. There are nine operational ponds now, with more on the way.

Scan for more



In 2019, a new tool started floating in B3R's water troughs. Aqua balls — black, polyethylene spheres filled with a touch of water have saved 5,000 gallons, or \$3,000-\$4,000, per trough.

Covering about 95% of the surface area, the balls prevent water evaporation, loss to wind and surface algae growth. The water is crystal clear and mildly cool on a 90° day. In the winter, the surface area is so small, ice rarely forms.

"We've got 45 tubs on the ranch, all about 2,000 gallons," says James. "They'd typically be dry come springtime, and we'd lose another 4,000 gallons in the summer to evaporation."

Solar-powered wells keep the water moving in sulfate-rich areas, providing overflow ponds for wildlife. Wildlife have also found water in the new springs that have emerged following brush removal.

## High expectations

Since Mary Lou and James came home, they've doubled the size of the herd and expanded acreage several times over. A two-section pasture that wouldn't sustain 20 cows can now hold 45 at 30 acres per cow.

They're proud of the successes, but it doesn't stop there.

Sustainability to Mary Lou and James is as much about the efficiency and quality of the animal as it is about land and water.

"We've really concentrated our cow herd on being efficient," says James. "Sustainability is doing more with less, and, well, the cows have to do that, too."

They've built indexes around the performance of their cattle and focus on cows that can raise a calf, breed back, do it on minimal resources and maintain flesh. With their background in meatpacking, they keep the carcass top of mind.

"We're trying to get a very highly productive cow," she says, "one that will have calves that'll work downstream for some of the CAB steaks later on."

While the genetics and performance indexes are finely

tuned in a detailed spreadsheet, management in nutrition is just as intentional.

When growing heifers, James says they try to get them to their mature weight as soon as possible. Why risk it when they can get her growing stages behind her before the calf ever hits the ground?

That nutrition is all in the grass and how they manage it.

Hundreds of species are out here, says James. "Predominately sideoats, blue and hairy grammas; silver and Iron Master bluestem; a lot of buffalo grass; a lot of dropseed; some white tridens; and we've come back in and planted a lot of what would have been the original prairie grasses, like big bluestem, Indiangrass and switchgrass."

Like a well-maintained lawn, regular and rotational grazing improves the grass. Growth above reflects growth below.

"To maintain grasses in a fragile environment, you've got to be able to let them grow plenty of roots," says James. "If we are grazing those grasses, then they regrow and refresh and redo. If you don't ever graze the grasses, they become stale and basically worthless from a nutritional standpoint."

Biodiverse grasses are essential as they mature at different times of the year, so the nutrient value varies. If a monolithic culture is all there is, James says, it's all really good or all not good.

This year their cows weaned 61.4% of their body weight and averaged a body condition score of 6-6.5 on a 9-point scale. That's a big deal in the Panhandle, says Mary Lou.

With more grass and better grazing come more cattle. They can graze a cow to 30 acres like they set out to do.

"For us, if you don't have the bottom line, we're not here," says Mary Lou. "We've got to make it work. Truly, we are sustainable, or we're not." ■

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Editor's note: Abbie Lankitus is a communications specialist for CAB.