

Adapted and Amazing



A Wyoming ranch proves cows that live on salt sage and rocky slopes can hit the CAB target.

Story & photos by
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Tough times have some ranchers wondering. Can they maintain the same production goals while whittling ever-deeper on cost efficiency? The answer may come from tough places, like the high-desert range of south-central Wyoming.

Some cows there can scrape up a living without extra inputs and without sacrificing rapid early growth or carcass quality in their calves. Adaptation likely requires some tradeoffs between cow function and chart-busting growth, but it's not the "either/or" case that it's often made out to be.

Peterson Livestock LLC, of Rawlins, Wyo., is living proof. The outfit switched from primarily sheep to solely cattle in the early 1970s. It was then that Elmer Peterson, who had acquired the ranch from his uncle, asked his daughter Pam and

son-in-law Bob Hones to come back to the ranch.

The couple now manages it with full-time assistance from daughter Diane Peterson and her husband, Josh. Older daughter Katherine Hones-Hullinger, a practicing veterinarian, and construction-contractor husband Shawn help when their schedules allow.

Adaptation was a big reason the family changed from sheep to cattle. "Before we came here in 1972, Elmer had bought a few black Angus heifers from the neighbor," Bob says. "The sheep were soon phased out due to the labor and coyote problems."

The local environment practically enforces survival of the fittest. It's

big country, where livestock as well as wildlife have to adapt. Even today, Pam says the ranch would lose 5%

of the calf crop annually were it not for an intense predator control program.

Winter storms can pack a punch with bitter cold and blowing snow. Those are reason enough for Peterson Livestock to postpone calving until later in the spring. There's no rush to get them

born early since the ranch manages all of its calves as yearlings before sending them to the feedlot.

"We have always watched quality grade closely," Pam adds, "so it just makes sense to retain ownership to reap the benefits of that."

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**Commercial
Commitment to
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Besides, Bob says, "If we didn't go all the way to the packer, we'd have to fine-tune things a little — somehow get a heavier, earlier calf [to sell at weaning] — or we could start calving even later."

Hard country

Outside of the low-lying hay meadows, the landscape is dotted in sagebrush. The ranch is made up of deeded land next to Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Union Pacific leases, with elevation from 7,000 to 8,000 feet (ft.).

Native grasses hide out in the areas where the sagebrush holds the

Above: Native grasses hide out in the areas where the sagebrush holds the winter snows the longest at Peterson Livestock LLC. The ranch is made up of deeded land next to BLM and Union Pacific leases, with elevation from 7,000 to 8,000 ft.



winter snows the longest. Perhaps the strongest feed on the ranch is a lesser-known plant called salt sage. “That’s the real secret on these flats,” Bob says. “People don’t think much of it, but it’s tremendous feed that cows really do well on.”

The past eight years have been so dry for much of the western U.S. that the Hones family was grateful when winter storms brought significant snow accumulation last winter. Through the early summer the ranch looked “as good as you’d ever see it,” Bob says.

During those drought years, Peterson Livestock took the initiative to develop solar-powered stock tanks in key areas to make use of the vast acres that their cows have to cover. “Our cows still have to walk a ways to water,” Pam says, “but we’ve sure made it better.”

Along with cows, the wildlife benefit from the water sources — antelope and prairie chickens have made remarkable use of the tanks. Nature and production must be carefully balanced in this part of the country. To that end Bob states, “We take care of the land. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have been here all of this time.”

Obviously the Peterson and Hones families have selected for hardy cows that can bring in a stout calf in the fall without much help. What’s even more impressive, however, is the performance of those steer and heifer calves, grazing as yearlings on nearby Elk Mountain, and finishing in the feedlot.

Consistently excellent

Since 2003, the custom finisher has been Darnall Feedlot, just east of Harrisburg, Neb. It’s there that the performance and carcass measures have culminated in a mountain of data that proves consistent excellence.

Gary Darnall, who manages the business with his son Lane, has seen a lot of good cattle through the years and has won a wall full of awards for quality (see “Headliners,” page 26). But he’s so impressed with Peterson Livestock cattle and people that he nominated them for the 2008 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award.

“They’re hard-working people trying to do everything right to increase performance and carcass quality,” Darnall says. He was there when Bob and Pam accepted the honor at the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) annual conference Sept. 13 in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

And the cattle? “As far as carcass quality and performance, they would be in the top 1% or 2% of the cattle we feed,” Darnall says. He’s even more amazed when he considers the kind of cow it takes to thrive on the Rawlins, Wyo., range.

“They’re not big-framed cattle, but their performance in the feedlot is very good,” he says. “They have a lot of acres, and those cows are not pampered. If I sent my cows up there, I don’t know if they would survive.”

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Representing Peterson Livestock LLC, winners of the 2008 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award include (horseback, from left) Josh Peterson, Diane Peterson, Katie Hones-Hullinger, Shawn Hullinger, (standing, from left) Pam Hones and Bob Hones. “They’re hard-working people trying to do everything right to increase performance and carcass quality,” says feeder Gary Darnall, who nominated them for the honor.

[PHOTO COURTESY OF PETERSON LIVESTOCK LLC]

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The past five years represent a short segment of the ranch's history, but the data collected through Darnall Feedlot shows that Peterson Livestock's carcass results are more than a flash in the pan.

A few thousand fed steers and heifers documented during that period show an average of 81% USDA Choice or higher

and 36% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance while keeping yield grade (YG) 4s and 5s to a respectable 11%. A recent closeout on 434 head showed an incredible 51% CAB acceptance rate. Those calves grew up during exceptionally dry years in the region, adding stress that typically puts a damper on grade.

Darnall and the Honeses make a point to review feedlot closeouts every year to dissect performance, feed conversion and carcass results.

"They're very good at using the data to make good decisions," Darnall says. But Bob and Pam are modest, crediting others for helping them.

Pam interacts most with the feedlot, and keeps an eye on the markets. But in the end, they simply trust the Darnalls to make the best decisions. "When it's blowing snow, the Interstate is closed and the cattle are 200 miles away, you just can't step out your door and take a look at them," Bob notes.

Seedstock connection

Addressing the genetic side of the equation, Pam places her confidence in primary seedstock supplier, GR Angus of Oak, Neb. Veterinarian Gary Rupp and Ronda Jaeger have been providing bulls to the Peterson outfit for the past decade or so.

"Gary picks the bulls, and he knows what kind of bulls will work for us," Pam says. The GR herd has been using highly proven bulls by artificial insemination (AI) for 15 years, Rupp says. The yearling bulls that he's picked and sent to Peterson Livestock trace back to no more than 10 sires.

A friend of the family for 30 years, Rupp recalls the demand their calves commanded years ago when they were fed near Wellington, Colo. "Monfort knew the cattle well, and they always bid pretty strong on them."

Building on that tradition, Rupp confirms that he and Jaeger have produced with a heavy emphasis on carcass quality, along with the other economically significant traits. Remembering Elmer Peterson's ideas on carcass quality, Rupp says, "He figured they were going to grade or they weren't going to own them."

The next generation extends that to a preference for dealing with trusted friends as well. Bob made the trip to Nebraska just once to select the bull calves. Since then, the agreement has been that GR Angus will send the required bulls to Rawlins, and Peterson Livestock can return any that are unacceptable. So far, no returns.

Rupp applauds the selection of the Peterson and Hones families for the CAB Commitment to Excellence Award. "I can't think of another commercial breeder that has delivered more quality cattle to the marketplace with the Angus name on them," he says. More importantly, Rupp agrees with Darnall when it comes to the folks who have made that commitment: "They're outstanding people."