

Watching Over the Herd



High cattle prices drive increase in theft. Cattlemen encouraged to take precautions.

Story & photos by
JOANN PIPKIN, freelancer

When Bunch Greenwade drove into his pasture in rural Greene County, Mo., one morning back in March 2013, the scene was one he didn't expect.

"Cattle were scattered on wheat pasture where they weren't supposed to be," Greenwade recalls.

He realized immediately something was wrong and found a five-strand barbed-wire fence had been cut in two places.

Ground feed had been scattered in the corral. Thieves had managed to coax calves into the pen. In all, seven head of 5-weight Angus and Angus-cross feeder calves were taken; an eighth animal Greenwade suspects died in the process of being loaded.

He later discovered feed had been scattered in the pasture. He says

he suspects it was a tactic to get the cattle used to eating grain so they could be more easily captured.

"[The thieves] got the cattle used to eating a little ground feed, and I had not noticed it," Greenwade explains.

While southern Missouri has seen a rash of cattle thefts in recent

years, University of Missouri (MU) Extension Livestock Specialist Eldon Cole said those crimes have declined in his area since July 2013 when a suspected thief was captured and charged with several of the burglaries.

Still, cattlemen across the country are likely targets for thieves as cattle prices continue to

reach record levels.

According to Larry Gray, executive director of law enforcement with the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA), his state saw an upsurge in cattle theft the last three months of 2014, largely due to the high price of cattle.

"Whatever is available to a thief and an easy target is what that thief is going to take, regardless of weight or size," Gray says.

In Kansas, Attorney General (AG) Derek Schmidt announced in December a joint effort between his office and the state's Department of

Agriculture to help curb cattle theft. A new Livestock/Brand Investigation Unit will operate within the AG office's consumer protection division.

"Its role is to support local law enforcement agencies in cattle-theft investigations around the state," Schmidt explains. He notes cattle

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theft is especially a problem in areas of the state where the livestock industry is most concentrated.

Because Kansas is a local-control state, Schmidt explains, “The general rule is that we wait for a request from local law-enforcement agencies before we provide assistance. The front door to any request of assistance a rancher or livestock producer may have still needs to be the county sheriff or local police department.”

Schmidt said those agencies, in turn, assess whether they need further resources, and that’s where the Livestock/Brand Investigative Unit comes in.

“The [Livestock/Brand Investigative

Unit] will take the lead when the theft crosses state lines,” he explains, noting good relationships are already in place with his counterparts and law enforcement agencies in surrounding states.

“In the cattle-theft context,” Schmidt says, “we’re going to be able to use those relationships that are preexisting in order to work closely with other states in the region. Obviously, thieves don’t respect

state lines, and this will allow us a much better capacity to cross state lines and deal with the problem regionally.”

Prevention best option

Both Gray and Cole suggest branding as a way for cattlemen to help prevent cattle theft.

“I can’t stress enough,” Gray says, “brand your cattle.”

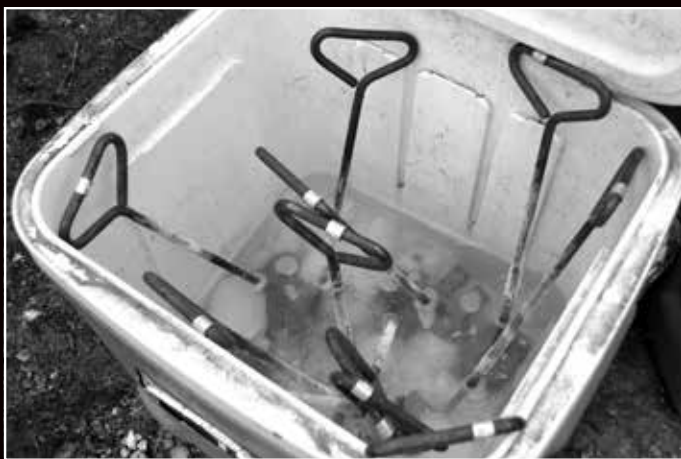
Missouri Angus breeder Cody Washam and his family have been branding their cattle for about five years. While the initial reasoning behind the practice was for identification, Washam says they also hope it deters thieves.

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10 tips to reduce cattle theft

- 1.** Place corrals and feeding areas as far from the road as possible.
- 2.** Keep gates chained and locked and secure gate hinges to prevent removal. Says Larry Gray, executive director of law enforcement with the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA), “Even though a lock won’t always stop a thief, at least you know if the lock or chain has been cut that the property has been attacked, and then you can investigate further.”
- 3.** Make daily checks of livestock, alternating time checks. Keep a good count on your stock, Gray recommends.
- 4.** Alternate feeding time.
- 5.** Keep corral areas lighted when animals are penned overnight.
- 6.** Make certain neighbors and law enforcement officials are notified when you’re not home for a day or more. “Thieves love to prey on absentee landowners,” Gray said. “If you are an absentee owner, try to get someone to help you keep an eye on your place.”
- 7.** Do not pen animals overnight in areas accessible from a road. If unavoidable, frequently check animals.
- 8.** Take photographs of animals and maintain other records of identification.
- 9.** Brand cattle for permanent identification and to deter theft.
- 10.** If you become a victim of theft, contact your local law enforcement agency.

Watching Over the Herd (from page 27)**The process of freeze-branding**

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While branding is a recommended deterrent against cattle theft, Washam says it may be a time-consuming practice.

"It's a learning process," he says, noting his family has just in the last two years fine-tuned the ins and outs of freeze-branding.

Good facilities are a must for branding, Washam says. "If the animal is too small, you must be sure the chute fits the size of the animal." The Washams installed a pallet as a space-filler when branding smaller animals.

Although freeze-branding can be done at any age, Washam suggested postweaning or prebreeding as optimum times for branding females. The American Angus Association also recognizes freeze-branding as a permanent form of identification.

"It's less stressful on the cattle," Washam says of freeze-branding vs. the hot brand. "I think the numbers are easier to see on black cattle versus the hot brand. Once the animal gets the initial cold shock, they really can't feel what you're doing."

Aside from the initial investment in brand registration and the irons themselves, Washam says, branding is affordable.

Steps to permanent ID

Equipment needed for freeze-branding includes branding irons, a refrigerant, clippers, a container for coolant, a brush and plastic squirt bottle, and restraining equipment or a cattle working facility.

Once the animal is restrained, clip the area where the brand will be applied. Clip a straight line, Washam advises. "This will serve as a guide for administering a straight brand."

After clipping, loose hair and scurf on the skin should be brushed away.

Next, spray the clipped area with alcohol. "Soak it," Washam suggests. "Be generous with the alcohol."

Then, the brand can be applied to the hide. Firm pressure is required to make good contact with the skin. MU Extension recommends holding the brand in place for about 40 seconds on mature animals. Washam said they typically use 60 seconds as a guide.

"If you're in the middle of branding and the animal moves, don't panic," Washam says. "Regroup. If you need to, put the iron back in the coolant. Otherwise, reapply the brand, making sure to leave it on for the full minute."

When not in use, the irons are housed in a refrigerant solution. Washam uses a cooler filled with gasoline and dry ice, which is an inexpensive alternative to the more commonly recommended 100% alcohol. Enough solution should be available to cover the irons by at least 1-inch.

"Gasoline is about one-third the cost of the 100% alcohol," Washam says. "Some people use 100% alcohol and have success with it. It is just more costly."

Washam cautions that gasoline should not be used in enclosed facilities for safety reasons.

Still another refrigerant alternative is liquid nitrogen. It is a quicker process in branding; however, Washam says they don't get along with it as well and prefer the gasoline and dry ice method.

A closer watch

Since that morning in March 2013, Bunch Greenwade has become more diligent about keeping a watchful eye.

"I have started watching a lot more closely for signs [of potential theft]," Greenwade says. "I make sure all the gates are locked, and I keep a closer watch on my herd."

Tips for buyers when theft is suspected

1. Record truck and trailer license plate numbers. Many thefts occur using stolen equipment.
2. Identify your customer with a picture identification (ID).
3. Most thefts occur at night, so be aware of nighttime shipments.
4. Contact your local police or the Highway Patrol and report any suspicious activity or unfamiliar vehicles in your area.
5. Fictitious farming and commercial operations use a P.O. box number for addresses.
6. Record animal ID numbers, ear tags, brands and tattoos.
7. Ask for and verify any shipping papers.
8. Question the driver of the shipment. Determine where and when the cattle are going and when they were received.

— *Source: Missouri Highway Patrol and University of Missouri Extension*

Still, deterring cattle theft is a team effort. A number of states have cooperative agreements similar to the newly formed Livestock/Brand Investigative Unit in Kansas. The Missouri Rural Crimes Investigative Unit, formed in 2009, focuses solely on the investigation of crime unique to the agricultural industry and farming communities in the state.

The Missouri Cattlemen's Association (MCA) and Missouri Farm Bureau each offer rewards for information leading to the arrest and conviction of persons committing cattle theft. Gray says Operation Cow Thief is a reward program in Texas and Oklahoma for witnesses or others who might have confidential information on cattle theft. A cash reward is offered upon arrest or grand jury indictment. Also in those states, the TSCRA helps victims work with market facilities and brand and market inspectors to track down stolen cattle.

Unbranded cattle are easy prey, Gray says simply. "A suspected thief [once] told law enforcement officials he'd never stolen branded cattle."

Editor's Note: Joann Pipkin is a cattlegirl and freelance writer from Republic, Mo.

Find out more:

Missouri Rural Crimes Investigative Unit:

Tip line: 1-888-484-8477

Email: ruralcrimes@mshp.dps.mo.gov

Web url: www.morciu.org

Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Operation Cow Thief

Web url: www.texascattleraisers.org/