

California's Ranching Revolution

Jim McDougald is doing what it takes to adjust to California's changing landscape and ensure the family ranch remains.

by *Sara Gugelmeyer*, photos by *Mark Holt*

When most people think of California, there are many things that come to mind, none of which have much to do with cattle or ranching. And yet, look at McDougald Ranch, which has been in the family for five generations, and you might change your perspective. Here, near Friant,

Calif., Hereford and black baldie cows graze contentedly in rolling hills of lush green grass bordered by beautiful oak woodlands. It's no wonder Jim McDougald's great-great-grandfather thought it was good land to homestead in 1889. Although little has changed on the McDougalds' 1,400 acres or so in the

last 132 years, tumultuous California has transformed life for the McDougald family and, therefore, the cattle operation, forever.

Times of change

The most dramatic changes to ranching in California, or really doing anything in California, have come about in the last 50 years, according to Jim. Most of



those have come with overregulation of public land. In addition to the McDougald family's cattle business, Jim's mother's family, the Norbys, were in the logging business. At one time, the two families logged on federal lands in California, operated a family-owned sawmill and ran as many as 800 cows by utilizing summer grazing permits on public land.

That has all since changed. "We used to take the cattle to the mountains in the summertime, so we were able to run a lot more cattle then," Jim explains. "Basically what happened is they started turning land into wilderness over environmental issues and basically dwindled the cattle in the central Sierras of California down to nothing."

Sure, the McDougalds still have the grazing permit, but now they are allowed to graze only 25 cows. "It isn't even worth it," Jim says. "We couldn't run enough cattle up there to make it worth the trip. Our operation was set up around having that mountain permit, and we didn't have a lot of rangeland that we owned, so that caused us to change our operation."

Jim says although the changes are necessary, they are saddening. "When I was a kid and through college, I used to help the family drive our cows to the mountains and spend summers in the High Sierras moving cows with my grandfather. Now no cows are allowed on that old permit, and my kids will never have the opportunity to experience that."

Also, the family logging business had to go completely. "For the same reasons, basically, the logging industry in California all went away," Jim says. "That actually all happened in my generation. Everything we were doing went away in my generation."

Starting out

Jim grew up on the family ranch, but he started his own herd as a kid with two cows his grandfather had given him. In about 7th grade, he started showing Herefords he raised. After graduation, Jim headed to nearby Fresno State University, Fresno, Calif., to study animal science and judge livestock. At Fresno State he gained



Jim and his wife, Valerie, enjoy raising their children Kinsey, 14, and Cody, 16, on the family ranch.

valuable knowledge as well as contacts in the livestock industry.

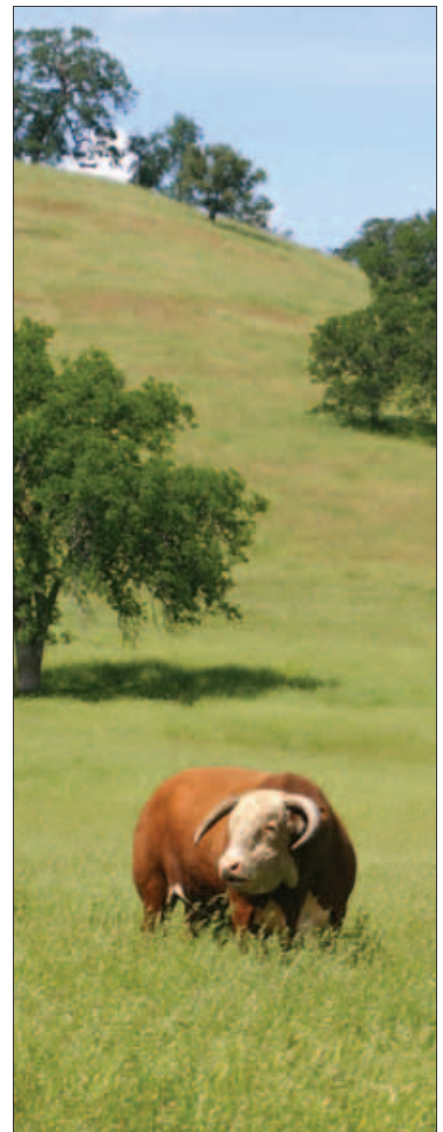
In fact, Jim says judging livestock at Fresno State greatly affected the course of his life. "I have to say that it was livestock judging that had a big influence in my life. John Corderio was my college coach, and he was a student and assistant coach for Bill Jacobs."

When Jim was looking for an internship, his connection to Bill Jacobs, then the manager of K74 Herefords, paid off. "I got the opportunity to go work at K74 in Oklahoma on an internship," Jim says. "That was my first opportunity to see what the real purebred industry was like and work for a big purebred operation like that. Although we had purebred cattle, I was never around a large-scale purebred operation, like selling maybe 100 bulls. It was definitely one of the things that changed my whole perspective on the Hereford breed.

I also met a lot of people while working for Bill, association people that I hadn't ever been around before. I started meeting a lot of people and becoming more involved in the Hereford breed. I owe a lot to both John Corderio and Bill. Without that I don't have any idea what would have happened in my life."

Jim's time in Oklahoma also affected his personal life. He met K74 herdsman Kevin Hafner's cousin Valerie, whom he would marry in 1991.

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Cattle thrive on the abundant grass in the beautiful rolling hills of the McDougald Ranch.



The McDougalds market top-quality replacement females like these each year.

Her family was also in the cattle business, showing Simmentals on a national level. Jim says, "I found a great wife and her family, and it propelled me to a different level in the cattle business."

Armed with the knowledge and seedstock industry connections he gained in college and at K74, Jim headed back to the ranch to put them to work. "We started using AI (artificial insemination) even before I came back," Jim says. "They (Bill and Cliff Knight from K74) really helped me out and worked with me and allowed me to use their bulls AI. At that time, all the purebred cattle came from my original two cows of my grandfather's except for a little semen I was able to get through the junior AI program. I learned to do AI when I was in college, so we started AIing a lot

using K74 bulls. I also bought the only cows that were introduced into the herd — probably a total of 10 cows came from there. We also started using some Holden-bred, Line One bulls."

Making it work

Until 1994 Jim worked at the family sawmill and cared for the cow herd. "When all these things started going down, the timber industry and the change of permits, I had to do something different," Jim says. It's not a big enough operation to make a living off of, so I went to work for the California Department of Forestry, CALFIRE."

CALFIRE is a state-funded agency that helps prevent and fight wildfires in the state of

California. Jim hired on as a firefighter, working 72-hour shifts with four days off in

between. When it wasn't fire season, this schedule allowed him time for the cattle. About a year ago, however, Jim was promoted to battalion chief and now is the pre-fire coordinator for the southern half of California.

Jim explains the pre-fire program: "One of our main involvements is working with private land owners to reduce fuel, brush and vegetation, to help reduce damage from wildfire. So we do things like help people build fuel breaks to protect homes or rangeland and make formulas to help folks do a better job of reporting what the damage is to rangeland, dollarwise. My cattle and livestock background has floated over to what I am doing with CALFIRE because now I am working with ranchers.

"A lot of the problem with fires is due to the changes in California. We've removed grazing, especially in our national forests, and logging, and it has caused us to have larger, more catastrophic fires because of the fuel concentration. As California becomes less agriculture friendly, places that used to be rangeland now have houses on them. There are big belts of grass or brush belts where people used to run cattle which now have really converted to houses, so when we have these fires, it burns up houses rather than just rangelands. It's all related to how things have changed in California."

On his own ranch, although he was forced to downsize because of the loss of federal-lands grazing, the McDougald herd now consists of about 125

cows, with approximately half being purebred and the remainder mostly black baldies. Still in partnership with his parents, Neil and Sandy, and brother, Neil Jr., Jim sells a few bulls, about 20 black baldie replacement heifers and the rest mainly as feeders to Harris Ranch Beef Co.

Jim also uses his livestock judging experience judging cattle shows. He has judged many regional shows and the Western Nugget National Hereford Show at Reno, Nev. Jim and Valerie have two children — Cody, 16, and Kinsey, 14, who are active in the California Junior Hereford Association and show home-raised cattle.

Jim says there are a million reasons why the junior program is good for his children, but he stresses that it's their choice to participate. "They just like to do it; they really enjoy the cattle, and it teaches them responsibility and all the things that go along with that. They like it, but if they don't want to show, they don't have to; I don't push them at all. My kids are really involved and busy with school activities too."

Family operation

McDougald Ranch, like so many outfits, is truly a family endeavor. Three generations — Jim's parents, Jim and Valerie, and Cody and Kinsey — live at the ranch headquarters and work together often. Although it's been remodeled many times, parts of Jim's parents' home were original to the ranch when it was homesteaded in the 19th century. The original blacksmith shop has been renovated and is still used as a shop on the place. With so much family history, Jim hopes to see the ranch continue into the next generation, despite the dwindling cattle operations in California.

The threat of subdivision still looms, but Jim says, "We haven't really sold off any land; it may be in different families, like uncles or cousins, but we haven't really

lost any land. Now it's all broke up where everybody has their own cows."

Being responsible and caring for the land is not something Jim takes lightly.

"Where we live you can run about one cow to every 10 or 12 acres. So what drives how many cows I run is the rangeland. In the years that California has droughts, we cut back on cows. Last year we started building cows again, but in the drought I was down to 75 cows. We do everything we can to not put this piece of land in jeopardy. That's why we work. If we just tried to run cows like a lot of people run cows and have these big fancy operations without the capital to do that, we could get in trouble. We run our operation to keep the land. We want to use the land with cows but do it within our means so we don't put the land in jeopardy for our kids."

Jim adds, "I have always tried to keep the cow herd improving and protect the land we have so my kids could be involved in the cattle business. That is one goal



Decades of selective breeding have helped Jim continue to improve his Hereford genetics.

that I have accomplished to this point. I hope that if my kids want to stay involved in the cattle business, they have a place here to do that and have a solid background. Regardless, if they are involved in the industry, the people they have met and the life lessons they are learning will help them with whatever they do.

"California has changed, I think, forever. Once the land is subdivided, it's gone. My family was really involved in doing things on government land with cattle and logging. But these things have all changed, and it's changed what our family does." **HW**



Good genetics and green grass produce fancy, big calves like this one for the McDougalds.