

Fighting Ferrets

No one cares when one cattleman gets riled up — that's why you need an organization to go to bat for you.

It's not an easy time to be in the cattle business. If it's not drought or flood or some other natural disaster wreaking havoc on us, it's "animal activists" and know-it-all city folks trying to tell us how to do our business. As if to add insult to injury, my husband, Jeremy, and I have been waging war with a new foe in the ranching world, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

And they don't care what we think. That's the reason why we're grateful for a much larger voice — the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). It's that organization's job to represent us. No one notices when one rancher gets riled up, but when you've got an entire organization going to bat for you, it's a little different story.

Here's our situation: The USFWS and its buddies at the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) honestly believe (or that's what they tell us) the Endangered Species Act works and they must do everything they can to re-establish thriving populations in a changed world no matter the cost. That sounds really great, but in reality, millions of

dollars can't make a species survive. In our part of the country (the Texas Panhandle), the issue at hand is with the endangered species the black-footed ferret. Ferrets rely on prairie dogs to exist, and prairie dogs to a rancher are about like earworms to a corn farmer. Not good. Now, we ranch on private land, so we have some rights, but we border USFS land on three sides and therein lies the problem.

The USFS wants to protect and grow prairie dog colonies right across the fence from us so the USFWS can turn out the all-but-extinct black-footed ferrets, which are not very hardy or adaptable. That's why they died out in the first place. This situation is making a lot of sense, right?

Anyway, once we heard about this "plan," if you can even call it that, we called the USFS; we called the USFWS; we called the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department; and we called our legislators. We talked to everyone who would answer. And you know what they told us? Thanks for calling.

They said, thanks for letting us know

that this ferret will likely jeopardize your ability to make a living, but we're going to proceed anyway. We had all but given up until I remembered that our ranch had purchased an NCBA membership. We had never really used it, but I looked up some numbers, left some messages and finally reached Theo Dowling, who works for NCBA and the Public Lands Council as the manager of legislative affairs.

Finally! Not only did she listen to my concerns, she actually had been to other black-footed ferret release sites and knew about the associated problems. We had an advocate.

Now, even Theo can't force the folks at the USFWS to do anything they don't want to. But, NCBA's comments and questions ring a lot louder than some young rancher's wife from the middle of nowhere.

We're still battling it out, but with the NCBA's help, we've gotten some concessions from the group that is organizing the ferret release, and it's not going to happen this year as previously planned.

Now, I know there are a lot of lucky cattlemen out there who don't have to worry about ferrets or wolves or prairie chickens or any of the other USFWS projects. But, I still encourage you to be a member.

Be a member of NCBA or the American Hereford Association or your state cattlemen's group. Be a member of them all. They have fun conventions, and you get to put that cool sticker on your pickup, but more than that, these are the people who know and understand our business, and more importantly these are the people who can influence those who don't understand our business. It's a small investment that can really reap benefits down the road when you need help.

These organizations are your voice. And just like us, you think you can speak for yourself until you're screaming at the top of your lungs and nobody's even turning to look. Don't wait till then to realize you need that voice. Be a member so you can be represented by somebody who actually is heard. **HW**