

HEREFORD WORLD

The voice of the American Hereford Association | August 2018

An Optimal Combination

A red baldy herd paired with sustainable management is the ticket to success.

by **Alden Caldwell**

It takes a special operation to get nearly everything right — improving water sheds, selecting desirable genetics and building a list of clients willing to pay a premium for its stock — but one ranch has accomplished this unique feat. Spreading across the valley floor and surrounding hills of Paisley, Ore., the J-Spear Ranch Co. makes use of all advantages available to a commercial herd with Hereford and Red Angus crosses.

Located in the high desert of Oregon's Lake County, the valley floor sits at a whopping 4,300 ft. elevation. Beautiful, branded barns and sturdy wooden corrals adorn the landscape, and sage brush and cottonwood trees commingle along the numerous waterways. Migratory birds come and go on their journey through the Pacific Flyway. The cattle population easily outnumbers residents 30-to-1, and the cowboy way of life is alive and well.

J-Spear Ranch's history spans almost as long as the town of Paisley. Founded in 1886, the ranch changed hands for the first time in the early 1970s and is currently owned by the Shaw family. In the 1990s the Shaws acquired the neighboring Brattain Ranch, along with Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

and Forest Service grazing permits, allowing the cow herd to sizably increase. Former owners of the Modoc Lumber Co. of Klamath Falls, Oregon, the Shaw family is committed to the long-term sustainability of timber and grasslands.

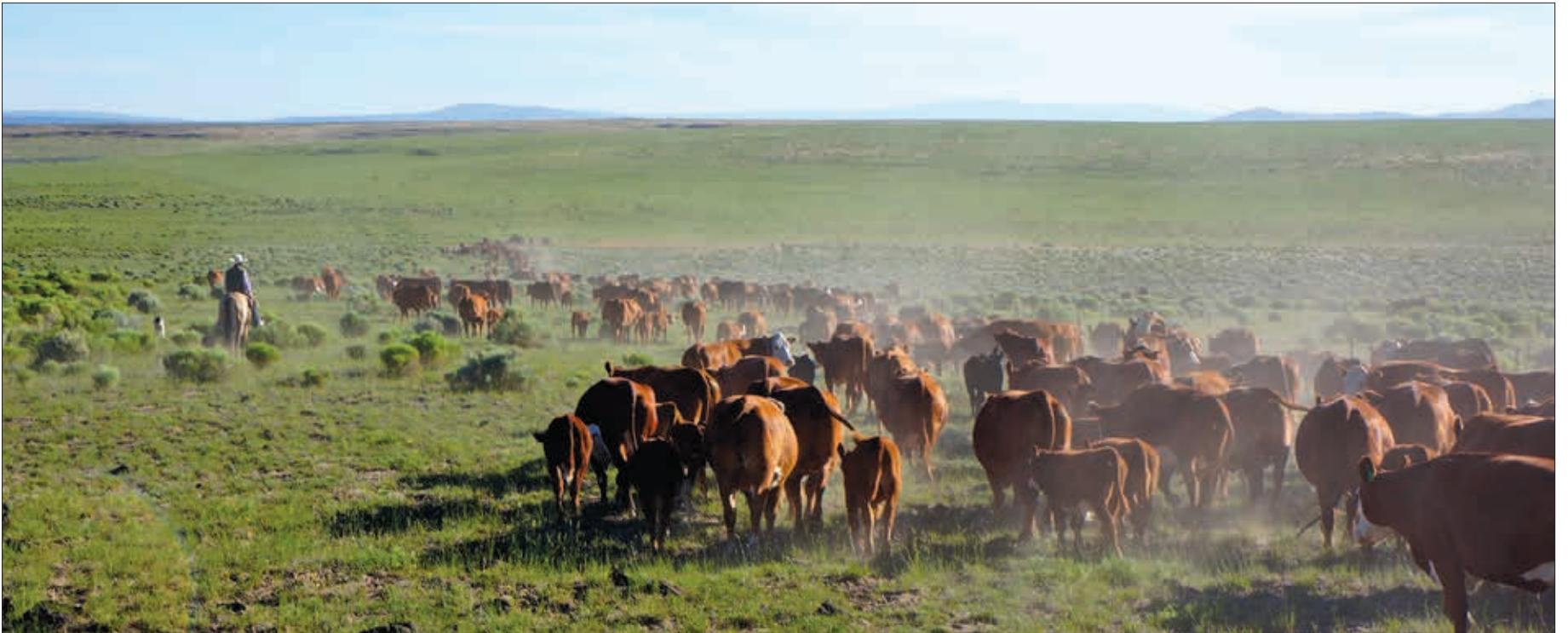
At the helm

Joe Villagrana, manager of J-Spear, has developed an outstanding commercial herd that thrives in cold winters and hot, arid summers yet consistently weans 600-lb. calves come fall. The Lake County native helped a friend flip ranches for resale before becoming the manager of J-Spear in 2007. Since then he has focused on the marketability of the ranch's commercial Hereford and Red Angus herd. "We made things easier by growing less hay and bringing in about 1,200 head of yearlings each year," Villagrana says.

Winters are cold and windy, with 10 inches of snow at the least, while summers are torrid, with an average rainfall of 11 inches. However, looking at J-Spear's cattle, one would think they were on meadow year-round. Villagrana's secret is selecting for a

continued on page 20...





The J-Spear Ranch develops cattle with longevity and performance by selecting consistently performing females and culling heavily each year.

combination of soundness and muscularity with adequate frame, culling heavily and retaining 300 heifers each year to reinvigorate the herd.

With a cow herd of 1,500, Villagrana is often on the road buying bulls. By virtue of their quality and availability in the Northwest, he primarily buys Hereford bulls but likes the terminal attributes of the Red Angus cross. Genetically, he looks for Hereford and Red Angus bulls with low birth weight.

“Visually I look for muscle — they have to be muscled up and square,” Villagrana explains. “They have to have good bone. They have to travel free moving, and not be too heavy to where they break down.”

When asked what he likes about the Hereford and Red Angus cross, Villagrana could go on and on. “Where do I start?” He laughs. “They are, by nature, great mothers. Genetically, through good bone structure, with the Red Angus influence they feed out exceptionally. They are just superior cattle in general, and, considering the environment, they are exceptional.” Herefords being a tried-and-true breed, Villagrana adds, “They’ve been selected for this area better than us humans.”

Villagrana selects for heifers with moderate frames and pigment around the eyes and pays close attention to the dam. “We look heavily at the mother. If she can handle the environment and

“[Herefords] have been selected for this area better than us humans.”

— Joe Villagrana

raises a good, stout calf year after year, that is a big selection criteria for us,” he notes. The heifers are exposed to the bulls for 30 days and achieve an 86% conception rate.

A traditional ranch in every sense of the word, J-Spear does about everything horseback including moving, sorting, roping, branding and doctoring. Rarer still, cattle are trailed to pasture. The journey from the main ranch to J-Spear’s BLM grazing allotment takes three days, but it is by far the best way to move a herd of 1,500 cows to new pasture.

After a fire decimated the area in 1979, there was a BLM announcement for “public lands to be intensively inventoried for wilderness characteristics.” At the time, public lands amounted to roughly 1,500 acres, but reseeded has become commonplace in the decades since. Approximately 11,500 acres of Lake County desert have been reseeded with crested wheatgrass. A highly competitive perennial, the nonnative bunchgrass offers abundant feed for livestock and wild animals — the cattle of J-Spear being no exception.

The cow herd is trailed to an eastern BLM lease in mid-February. Calving mid-March to April gives the cows a safety factor for occasional late winter storms. Because of the remote and vast location of the lease, they are left on their own for calving and are gathered again for branding in early June.



The herd achieves an 86% conception rate through natural service even though bulls are left with females for only 30 days.

Villagrana maintains a 30-day calving window to produce a uniform calf crop. This time frame also allows him to cull cows that are underperforming or bred late.

“I only select the cows that can handle this environment. They are calving out here on their own. It’s natural selection that we manipulate to have the highest success rate possible, and we have a good system going,” Villagrana says.

Judging by the impressive calf crop, the maternal traits of Herefords coupled with the low birth weight and high growth rate of Red Angus seem to be the perfect combination in the high desert.

The cows are equally as impressive as the seedstock bulls. Averaging 1,200 lb., they phenotypically look as if they have been grazing a lush meadow. They exemplify everything Villagrana is selecting for – big-boned, free-moving cattle and excellent mothers.

Successful stewardship

Sustainability is a top priority for the ranch. Villagrana is adamant about the cohabitation of cattle and wildlife. Progressive in its approach to endangered species like the sage grouse, J-Spear has kept pace with creating habitat for birds by clearing juniper trees and enhancing watersheds on the ranch.

Pasture rotation is a must for the operation, and Villagrana adds the ranch always leaves some feed in the pasture to optimize the field for wildlife and the future rotation. The manager intensively grazes one pasture at a time and moves the cows every three days on the main ranch. “We’ve found it’s better on the cattle and better for the grass,” Villagrana adds.

An operation worth mimicking, J-Spear prides itself on working with the environment to mitigate risk and to increase profit by embracing the ever-changing landscape. Partnering with Ducks Unlimited and the Department of State Lands on three separate occasions, J-Spear has enhanced waterways on the property through stream restoration and earthen dams to benefit waterfowl and to increase yearly hay tonnage.

“It’s nice when these projects benefit the ranch and ecosystem,” Villagrana says. To date, more than \$500 thousand in waterway restorations on the ranch have been funded through grants and private money.

In another 2007 collaboration with the Forest Service and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), J-Spear completed a \$2 million project for high-tech fish screens. These screens allow record-sized “redbands” rainbow trout to navigate up the Chewaucan River to spawn each year.

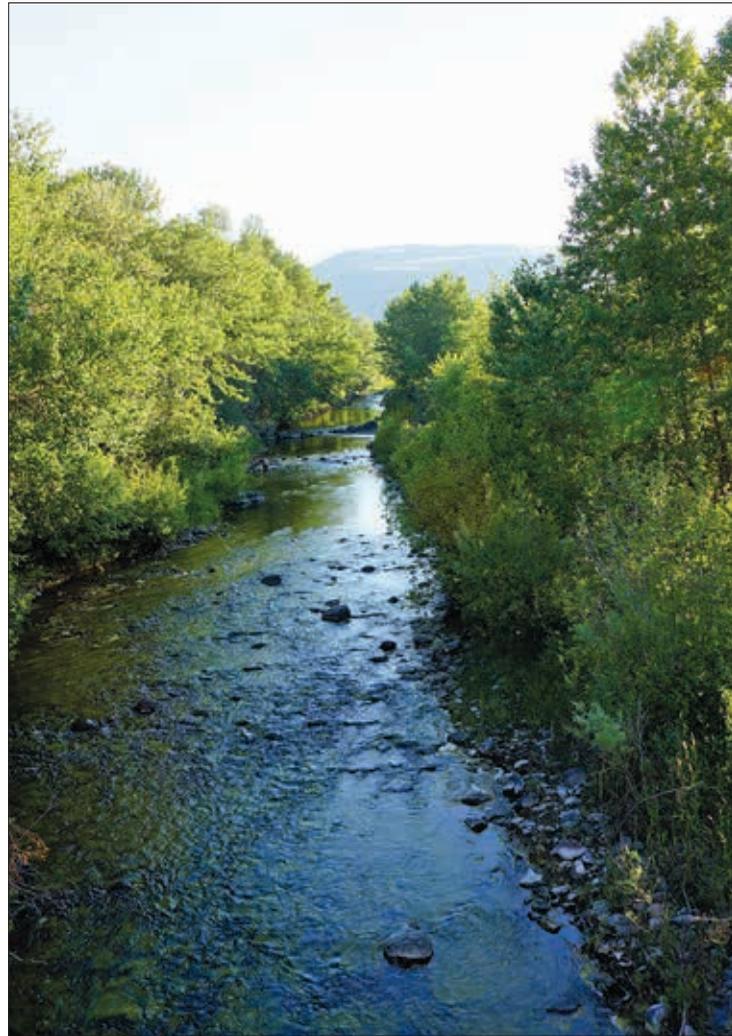
Remaining relevant

Breeding for the top of the market is top priority. J-Spear has the demand and receives a premium for its Hereford and Red Angus cattle. Raising strictly natural cattle allows for a distinct product, suitable to any finishing method. Offering a phenotypically attractive and natural calf crop, the ranch sells animals through Western Video Market, Superior Livestock Auction and private treaty. “Most of our buyers are return customers year after year,” Villagrana notes.

A true leader in developing excellent commercial cattle, Villagrana is involved with the cattle until harvest – gleaning insight from carcass data to refine the main herd. To maintain consumer demand, J-Spear goes through the process of remaining Tier 4 Global Animal Partnership (GAP) Certified, the highest tier a non-harvesting facility can hold.

“We are more natural now than we’ve been in the 11 years I’ve been manager,” Villagrana says. The ranch also boasts one of the first sets of ranch corrals designed by the renowned Dr. Temple Grandin, installed years before she became a revolutionary voice of livestock systems and handling.

As for the future of J-Spear, Villagrana says it comes down to economics. “In the last few years we’ve been able to streamline a lot of input costs,



Because the cohabitation of cattle and wildlife is important to the J-Spear, sustainability remains a top priority for the ranch.

saving the ranch thousands of dollars every year,” he notes. With 1,200 head of yearlings to graze on the extra hay fields, J-Spear has reduced the summer labor needed and capitalized on high markets. Developing the main herd and creating brand recognition have also increased revenue for the ranch.

J-Spear Ranch Co., Joe Villagrana and his team have created a top-notch operation, admirable to all in the industry. At the end of the day, they have coupled the need for sustainability and the desire to develop high-quality commercial cattle through proper handling to create a unique business model that works.

“What we take out of the land, we always try to put back in,” Villagrana says about the efforts of J-Spear Ranch. “It’s our responsibility as stewards of agriculture.” **HW**



The J-Spear boasts one of the first sets of ranch corrals designed by Dr. Temple Grandin.