



Providing and Protecting

Huth Polled Herefords and S&H Livestock Enterprises were recognized as an ESAP regional winner.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

Jerry Huth's Hereford cattle have grazed and thrived among the wet Wisconsin lowlands on the outskirts of Oakfield for 60 years. Originally a 4-H project run amuck, Huth's herd of bald-faced bovine serves as a model of sustainable cow-calf production, from his careful grassland management to Huth-bred cattle's ability to efficiently convert available forages into growth, gain and fertility.

Huth and Josh Scharf, his commercial cattle partner, were recognized as a 2022 Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) regional winner by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) during the 2023 Cattle Industry Convention & NCBA Trade Show in New Orleans.

Bald-faced sustainability

Huth landed on Hereford cattle after a run-in with an Angus show heifer prospect, which ended with the black-hided heifer running through the village of Oakfield. Since then, docility has always been top-of-mind when building his cow herd. The Hereford breed, though, ticks many other boxes Huth needs to manage a profitable cow-calf operation. They're efficient, fertile and docile with exceptional fleshing ability and stayability. He culls hard on all counts.

Huth believes cows should work for you — not the other way around. Each female at Huth's needs

to have a calf each year, on time and unassisted. She must have enough milk to ensure adequate calf growth; large teats or drooping bags are not tolerated. Cows must do all of this in a moderate, efficient, easy-keeping package with no structural or soundness issues. Failure on any count means that females will be culled quickly and without question.

"We try to keep it as simple as possible around here," Huth says. "It is very important that the cow works for us and that we don't work for our cows. We cull our cows very strictly. They better produce for us, or they are heading to town."

Huth doesn't pamper or baby his cow herd for them to perform; he simply expects them to carry their weight. He touts the "KISS" method of cow-calf management — keep it simple. He willingly admits that building a low-maintenance, high-performing set of females is not always simple. Doing so requires striking a balance between antagonistic traits, such as birth weight and growth or moderate cow size and high-performance genetics. But, with careful record-keeping and evaluation tools such as expected progeny differences (EPDs), Huth has been able to improve his cow herd over the last six decades.

So, when an opportunity arose for Huth to partner with longtime family friend and farm employee Scharf on a commercial cow herd,

bringing Huth Hereford genetics into the fold was a no-brainer. The breed brings added efficiency, fertility and docility, and the heterosis from crossbreeding with unrelated black bulls added an extra boost to their crossbred calf crop. Steer calves from their commercial operation, called S&H Livestock Enterprises, are sold at the Greater Midwest Hereford-Influenced Feeder Calf Sale in Carthage, Ill., and buyers readily pay premiums for their quality genetics. Many steer calves sold through the program eventually become Certified Hereford Beef® or find their way to other value-added, Hereford-centric branded beef programs.

To summarize Huth and Scharf's choice in breed — bald-faced sustainability. This made Hereford genetics a popular choice among ESAP award winners nationwide (watch for more in future issues).

And as Huth reminds us, a sustainable cow-calf operation isn't just environmentally conscious.

"Sustainability is really a hot topic right now. And most people are talking about environmental sustainability. But we can't forget about the other things that make an operation sustainable," Huth says. "Number one, it has to be profitable financially ... it also has to be socially acceptable. And those three things — environmental, social and financial — are the three legs of the stool that keep us balanced. Keep working on all three; it should be a sustainable operation, and that's what we're shooting for."

For the love of the land

Currently, of course, sustainability is often used to discuss environmentally friendly management styles as concerns about the climate, resources and wildlife are top-of-mind with consumers. By any use of the word, Huth Polled Herefords and S&H Livestock Enterprises are sustainable beef cattle operations. Huth and Scharf manage their cattle in a way that is not only profitable but future minded.

"I think that cattlemen, by the nature of the beast, are some of the best stewards of the land. You have to take care of the land, and then the land will take care of you," Huth says.

Focused land stewardship here comes with the added responsibility of running cattle within a mile of Horicon Marsh, the largest freshwater cattail marsh in the U.S. — recognized as a Wetland of International Importance by the United Nations. Managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), this is also home to the Horicon Marsh Wildlife Area, a critical waterfowl nesting and migratory resting area.

The 400 acres of the original Huth Polled Herefords farm have been in Huth's family since 1964. After reading Grassworks papers in the 1980s, Huth began to manage his pastures more intensively. Today, with three decades of grass management under his belt, Huth rotates his cow herd through the pastures, grazing in one spot only one to three days before the cattle are moved, and then that pasture is rested for 20-30 days.

This management minimizes inputs while maximizing the available forages; it also has positive effects on the environment — sequestering carbon, encouraging healthy soil development and providing a safe haven for local wildlife. This grass management style forged a mutually beneficial



Jerry Huth (l) and Josh Scharf (r) were recognized for their sustainable cow herds, careful management and conservation during the 2023 Cattle Industry Convention & NCBA Trade Show. Huth Polled Herefords and S&H Livestock Enterprises were awarded a regional ESAP award for their efforts.

Photos by NCBA and the Environmental Stewardship Award Program

relationship between Huth Polled Herefords, S&H Livestock Enterprises and the Wisconsin DNR. The cattle operations now conduct controlled grazing on 130 acres of state-managed public land next to the home farm. As Scharf attests, the results have been remarkable.

When Huth and Scharf first stepped onto state-managed public land, it was overwhelmed with tall, woody vegetation. Before turning the cows out to graze, the pair had to mow the land to knock back the brush. Soon the cattle could do their jobs under the proper management, and their timed and

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Photos by NCBA and the Environmental Stewardship Award Program

Huth Polled Herefords is less than a mile from the Horicon Marsh, the largest freshwater cattail marsh in the U.S. and a critical waterfowl nesting area. Proper land management is essential to protect this important habitat.

controlled grazing balanced the forages and fauna. The DNR was happy that native grassland birds sought shelter on the acreage, and warm-season grasses emerged for the first time in years without being crowded out by a brushy canopy. The only vestige of the land's previous state is a small fenced-off section left untouched to showcase the power of managed grazing. The small square patch is a mess of woody branches and tall reed grasses tangled, twirly and nearly head high.

The management of the public-owned acreage is just one example of how Huth and Scharf serve as stewards of the land. Large grass strip buffers protect the lowland's marshy waterways. Managed pastures need less spraying and chemical applications. Timed grazing rotations help preserve seasonal nesting grounds for important native birds. This extra reverence for the land made Huth Polled Herefords and S&H Livestock Enterprises stand out among a stack of ESAP award applicants.

Recognizing farms and ranches

The ESAP was conceived in 1991 to recognize outstanding stewardship and conservation practices among cattle producers nationwide. Gary Price, previous national ESAP award winner and ESAP award selection committee chair, knows firsthand about the ethics, unflappable spirit and forward-

thinking required to win the award from a pool of worthy, sustainable cattlemen and stewards.

"Sustainability to me means the slow, long haul, the big picture and the long term — staying year after year after year with all the challenges," Price says. "Sustainability is looking at the various changes and how we can adapt ... We like to take a holistic approach."

Price also knows that outside of encouraging sustainable land use and management, the ESAP awards encourage beef industry advocacy. The winners serve as sources, examples and storytellers for not only those in the industry but also for consumers. The tales of their concern for their land and cattle serve as supporting evidence of cattlemen and women's constant quest to leave this world better than they found it.

"We have a good story to tell about how the cow, when taken care of and grazed properly, is a

great asset for the land. We like to say if we didn't have the cow, we would probably be trying to invent her," Price says.

Huth's story and his dedication to his land left a lasting impact on Price.

"Jerry is revered by God's creation. The ethics he created for his land over time were born through his faith," Price says.

While Huth is undoubtedly moved

by his faith in God and the future, he and Scharf hope that those 400 original acres and the cow herd they've created will serve their families for generations.

"Herefords paid for my college education. Herefords paid for my children's college education, and I hope they will do so for my grandchildren," Huth says.

Scharf feels as though the next generation is coming full circle. He fondly remembers Huth helping him with his first county fair steer project, which launched him into a lifetime of stockmanship and stewardship.

"My 10-year-old daughter showed a steer for the first time this year at the county fair. She is following the path that I started with, and I know that the condition of the animals and the land has only improved over the years," he says. "We take care of our animals. We take care of the land, and we're creating a product that is nutritional and sustainable." **HW**



Huth and Scharf utilized rotational grazing and disciplined management to transform 130 acres of public land from a tangled, brushy mess into a bountiful resource, which provides refuge for grassland birds and sustenance for cows. The only vestige of its previous state is the small fenced square of brush (left), maintained to illustrate the benefits of managed grazing.