

# Adding Red, Going Green

**Hereford genetics help leading land stewards enhance sustainability.**

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

From coastal prairies with scattered oak knots to rocky, high deserts dotted with sagebrush, Hereford genetics work for sustainably minded cattlemen and women. Consider just two 2022 Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) regional winners: Parks Ranch, Goliad County, Texas, and Fulstone Ranches, Smith Valley, Nev. Both commercial cattle operations use Hereford genetics to add fertility, hardiness, predictability, docility and good ol' fashioned hybrid vigor.

Operating environments between the two ranches are vastly different, yet the goals of each are strikingly similar: produce high-quality cattle in a sustainable, future-minded fashion. Both operations also highlight how bald-faced genetics can work for cattlemen and women across the country.

## **Not too harsh for Herefords**

Fulstone Ranches won national recognition from their peers for their work to preserve habitat for wildlife species such as the bi-state sage grouse. But the management and hardiness of their high-desert cow herd help sustainability and profitability go hand-in-hand.

The landscape of Smith Valley can be challenging. While the lush green valley is flush with irrigated pastures, it is surrounded by steep, rocky mountains smattered with lava rock and native sagebrush.

Cattle, in this country, deal with mammoth temperature and elevation changes from the warm valleys to the cold peaks reaching more than 10,000 feet high. The stocking rate reflects how hard cows must hustle to find their groceries.

Fulstone Ranches run 500 cow-calf pairs on the ranches' 60,000-acre summer permit for three months. This means some cattle only walk to their water source every three days, according to seventh-generation rancher Emily Fulstone.

"You'll see this cow come in on the third day, and she'll sit at the water all day. Then she'll pick up her

calf and her friends, and after one day of sitting on that water, they'll go out to better feed that's just a little bit further away. They'll sit there for two days and then come back on the third day," Fulstone says. "That ability to travel and be a little bit hardier in a harsher climate is really important."

Fulstone's red-baldy cows seem to have the extra grit to thrive in their high mountain home. Not only do they make docile and attentive mothers, but their structural soundness also enables cows to stay in the Fulstone herd longer, even with the rocky terrain.

"We add a lot of longevity to our cows by adding the Hereford," Fulstone says. "The average age of cows coming up open or being culled on our ranch is around 15-18 years old. It's always the stocky baldies who make it until they're ancient. We had one cow who made it until she was 25. She still had a calf that year and died on the property."

With the added hardiness and heterosis the bald-faced breed brings to Smith Valley, Fulstone says that each year about a quarter of their herd sires are range-ready Hereford sires they purchase from South Mountain Bulls in Idaho. The remainder of their sires are Angus. While they don't segregate their cow herds by color, Fulstone Ranches do lean red when keeping replacement females. According to Fulstone, the red-baldies are more docile, stronger, bigger boned and hardier than their black-hided peers. Past their red-hided bias when picking replacements, Fulstone selects for sound, moderate and easy-keeping females, which can easily tackle the terrain and stay in the herd for years to come.

Feeder cattle raised on Fulstone Ranches are sold as All-Natural Certified cattle with no hormones, steroids or antibiotics as audited by IMI Global. And many of their calves land in grass-finishing programs because of their tendency to do well on forages after carving out a living in the mountains among the sagebrush. To create all-natural cattle in a naturally tough environment, Fulstone has matched her cow herd to its environment. When she returned to the

ranch, she learned just how much management can affect an environment. Fifteen years ago, their grazing permits hinged on the habitat of bi-state sage grouse.

These hen-sized, flightless birds live in a very limited territory in the Sierra Nevada Range; just over 3,000 of the birds remain, according to estimates. Knowing that Fulstone Ranches sits squarely in the middle of important nesting grounds, the family worked tirelessly to restore the birds' habitat. They cleared pinyon-juniper trees that hoarded the limited water from mountain streams and springs and crowded out native grasses — often doing the job by hand on private land with hand loppers. The resulting clearings became desert oases, with the water returning to springs, streams and lower-lying pastures, and native grasslands and sage once again taking hold without the overbearing conifers.



Hereford influence adds longevity, hardiness and docility to the Fulstone family's high-desert cow herd. Seventh-generation rancher Emily Fulstone selects cattle that thrive in these harsh conditions and fit her family's sustainable management practices.



Photos by NCBA and the Environmental Stewardship Award Program

The Fulstones' efforts transformed their rangeland into a more productive environment for both grouse and cattle. In order to protect this established harmony, the family continues to clear encroaching pinyon-juniper, as they have for nearly two decades. They also carefully plan their cow herd's grazing around key bi-state sage grouse nesting times.

Since Fulstone Ranches pivoted to a more sustainable approach, encouraging a balanced ecosystem and healthy soil over hay and pasture ground alike, the family has nearly halved their fertilizer use and has seen a 30% increase in their soil's water retention. Fulstone's father sees streams and springs returning to the area as the ecological balance is restored.

"Everything starts with the soil," Fulstone says. "What's good for the soil is good for the cow, and then it is going to be good for us."

The Fulstones have deep roots both in Smith Valley and the Hereford cattle they run there.

### Predictable and profitable

David Crow is a first-generation rancher. He purchased Parks Ranch a little over two decades ago. Once at the helm of his family's trucking and concrete company, Crow pivoted to pursue his lifelong dream of ranching when the business sold. He invested in ranches around Texas, and his fresh-eyed approach to ranch management let him bring his business savvy without the baggage of generational tradition.

"We don't get mired down in the traditional things," Crow says. "Number one, it is a business, so you want to make good business decisions."

To Crow, those decisions simply had to be land centric. So, when building his ranches, he often looked at the pastures first, and then found cattle suited for the landscape. Crow needed efficient, predictable cattle that would thrive in the various Texas environments comprising his multiple ranches — cows that could utilize the available forages efficiently while preserving hunting and game opportunities. And that is how he landed on the three-quarter Hereford and quarter Brahman cross replacement females from McFaddin Ranch that he dubs the "quarter-bloods."

For the last 20 years, Crow has used these Hereford-influenced females on his ranches. The red baldy and sometimes tiger-striped females offer one key attribute that every good businessperson

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needs — predictability. When mated to a black bull, these females wean good-sized, black baldy calves that are accepted by every potential value-added market, from Certified Angus Beef to Certified All-Natural.

“We love the maternal instincts of the Herefords; they just make good mamas. We don’t have crazy cows,” Crow says. “One of the more important things is that our cattle are predictable.



and brush management. The resulting prairie is rich with tall native grasses, such as big bluestem and little bluestem, and spattered with clusters of oak trees, making it the perfect haven for his cow herd to graze before seeking shelter under the trees during the sweltering parts of the day.

Parks Ranch’s 4,000 acres are divided into 10 pastures, and Crow uses what he calls “eyeball management” to rotate his Hereford-influenced herd. Every pasture reacts differently to the heat and rain, and Crow calls managing the landscape an imperfect art form.

“I’ve always subscribed to the theory that it is not how long you graze the pasture; it is how long you rest it,” Crow says. “That being said, you still have to harvest the grass. I try to take half and leave half.”

The added docility of his bald-faced cow herd makes them easy to shuffle from pasture to pasture, and their genetics make them and their calves both genetically predictable yet teeming with hybrid vigor.

“It’s the hybrid vigor that makes these cattle,”

Crow says.

It’s been easy for Crow to make a sale on the calves. The black baldy offspring are easy to market and in high demand. Many repeat customers bid on Crow’s calves and most land outside of Texas, touting their adaptability.

While Crow is a first-generation rancher, his son, Matt Crow, a Texas Christian University ranch management graduate, joined him as a partner. Looking

forward, sustainability and predictability will still continue to go hand-in-hand to provide ranch profits.

“Once you have that piece of property, that ranch or farm, you need to give it time and find out how that land works,” Crow says.

Just as importantly, ranchers must find a cow herd that will work for them and their environment. For both Crow and Fulstone, that cow herd is Hereford-influenced. **HW**

**Editor’s note:** Huth Polled Herefords and S&H Livestock Enterprises, Oakfield, Wis., were also 2022 ESAP regional winners. Their story appeared in the April 2023 issue of *Hereford World*. The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association recognized all 2022 ESAP regional winners during the 2023 Cattle Industry Convention and NCBA Trade Show in New Orleans.



Photos by NCBA and the Environmental Stewardship Award Program

David Crow was a business owner before he pivoted to ranching. The first-generation rancher brought his business savvy approach to managing his cow herd and finds his Hereford-influenced females have the predictability he needs to make profitable and sustainable management decisions. Now, he is sharing what he learned with his partner and son, Matt.

The red-hided cattle seem to do better in South Texas with the heat and flies.”

While the Hereford-influence females thrive on Crow’s Park Ranch in Goliad County, Texas — about 175 miles south of Houston — Crow says the three-quarter Hereford females on his ranches in West Texas really shine.

“Those cattle have really excelled in the Marfa Plateau. It’s a real niche for them. They seem to be the perfect type of animal for that region,” he says.

While Crow sustainably manages all his ranches, he was honored as a regional ESAP winner specifically for his work encouraging biodiversity in Parks Ranch’s coastal prairies. For two decades, Crow carefully managed the land to maintain the prairie with controlled burning, rotational grazing