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7/25/2008 8:20:00 AM

Jolley: Five Minutes With The Stone Family, Yolo Land & Cattle Stewards



Interesting how many of the most successful ranches are irrigated with the sweat of several generations of a family working together, hoping that the next generation will appreciate the lifestyle just as much. Since running a big ranch is a 24/7/365 business and, according to one of my wiser friends, "a minimum wage job at best when you figure the hours," that family thing has to be the main driver.

The Stone family own Yolo Land & Cattle Co., dedicated to preserving the beauty and wildlife of the ranch while raising one of the top commercial herds of Angus cattle in California. As you can see in the picture, 10 of them spanning 3 generations raise cattle, act as stewards of some beautiful California land, work hard to manage ranch's natural ecosystem, conduct tours for curious urban cliff dwellers and soon will start selling their grass-fed beef direct.

Improving the ranch ecosystem has brought them awards. But I wondered if it helped put money on the table at the end of the day. Deciding to get into beef retailing in today's tough market is another expensive roll-of-the-dice. If sweat equity counts for anything, they'll probably make it work, though. I cornered second generation sons Scott and Casey Stone and asked them a few questions about ranching in the far Western regions of God's country.

Q. Scott and Casey, the Stone family has run Yolo Land and Cattle for over 30 years. There are two generations running the business today. How has it changed in those three plus decades?

A. Henry ran the business as a sole proprietor for many years. Scott came into it in 1983, and Casey joined the present day partnership in 1992, so there has been an adjustment in management structure every ten years or so. Now our wives are involved and they bring their experiences and perspectives into the decision-making process.

Each of us gets busy with our particular area of responsibility, and it is a lot more work to keep others up to speed, and focused on the big picture. It has required us to have more planning meetings than we've ever had before, which is always a challenge with everybody's hectic schedules. Obviously we're a much more diversified operation than when the business was started. Our goal is to continue that diversification and growth so that our children have an opportunity to get involved, should they choose to do so.

Q. Casey, your wife, Angela, handles tourism for the ranch, and Scott, your wife, Karen, handles marketing. Those are positions that few other ranches offer. Tell me why those positions are necessary and what Angela and Karen bring to the success of the ranch?

A. Unfortunately, they're not full-time positions, yet, although our wives would correctly argue that they spend a great deal of time on them. Angela has a background in meeting planning, and she has her meeting planning certificate, which comes in handy for planning events and tours at our ranch. Karen has a background in real estate sales, as she and Scott have a successful Ag real estate company on the side. Her strength has always been marketing, and she brings a fresh approach to selling conventional Ag commodities.

Q. Tell me about the ranch. Where is it located? How big is it? And what do you raise?

A. We operate numerous ranches in Yolo and Solano Counties about 30 miles west of Sacramento. Our headquarters property is located near the town of Madison, and it includes 7,500 acres of coastal range land. We also lease several other rangeland ranches in Yolo County. In addition, we also farm in Yolo and Solano Counties, producing wheat, alfalfa, ryegrass, and Sudan hay for domestic and Asian export markets. We also manage about 1,000 acres of irrigated pasture, and 600 acres of that is used for rinse water discharge for a local tomato cannery.

Our cattle operation consists of 700 fall and spring calving Black Angus and Angus cross-bred cows. My father also has about 50 purebred cows, which supply the majority of our seed-stock for the commercial herd.

Q. You're raising grass-fed Angus. Are they in a 'natural' program or do you use antibiotics?

A. All of our cattle are natural-we use no growth hormones or antibiotics. In addition.

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many of the calves go into grass-fed programs, where they are lightly feedlot finished on alfalfa, rice bran, and almond hulls, with no grain based products or feed additives.

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Q. A recent news article in the Woodland Daily Democrat said "The Stone's true legacy, and certainly their most successful endeavor, are their many conservation projects." It talked about such extraordinary steps as wildlife friendly fencing, buffer strips to reduce pond sediment, efforts to improve grazing efficiency on the range, and restoring riparian watersheds, earning the ranch the 2008 Environmental Stewardship Award from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. You've incurred some serious expenses in doing those things and many of those steps are what other ranchers might call questionable investments. Can you tell me why you made those decisions and have they proven profitable?

A. Scott has been the visionary in the family, and he has encouraged us to make the leap into these programs. In 1996, he attended the Colorado Ranching for Profit School, which forced everyone to think outside the box and look at possibilities for developing ranch resources.

We have also been blessed with excellent conservation partners in our county; Audubon Landowner Stewardship program, NRCS, SLEWS, and our local Resource Conservation District, just to name a few. All of these groups made it easy for us to do these projects. They provided the engineering expertise, labor, and in many cases, the funding through cost-share programs to get the projects done.

We feel that the investment has been worth it overall, and we find ourselves committing more funds on an annual basis to doing these projects, when the budget allows. Some of the projects, such as cross-fencing, have produced tangible benefits such as increased grazing density. Other projects, like riparian restoration, have improved the aesthetics and wildlife diversity of the ranch, which in turn has resulted in more visitors for our agri-tourism division.

The ESAP award was a direct result of the great press we have received from doing these projects. I believe that the main reason we won the award was because we placed the bulk of our headquarters into a conservation easement with the California Rangeland Trust, so that the ranch can never be developed and will always be preserved as a pristine working landscape. The conservation work we did on the ranch made us a prime candidate for funding the easement, since the bulk of it was funded by California public bonds.

Q. Yolo has been a leader when it comes to agricultural marketing. You're offering tours, selling branded beef sticks, jerky and clothing. Now you're talking about selling beef direct. Why have you made that decision? And how will it be marketed?

A. We have always produced an extremely high quality animal. My father is the geneticist in the family, and he has a keen eye for bull selection which mirrors packer demand. Unfortunately, although our calves do very well at sales, we've always felt that we're not receiving enough of a premium.

In addition, friends are constantly asking where they can buy our beef directly, and we've never really had an answer for that until now. We are in the process of revamping our website to accommodate direct sales, and we're working on the logistical hurdles associated with feeding and processing live animals. California has a serious shortage of abattoirs and cut-and-wrap facilities that are USDA approved. I think this is the greatest challenge for any producer contemplating the jump to direct sales, at least in this state.

The other challenge is finding a finishing ration that qualifies as grass-fed under USDA guidelines. We briefly finish the cattle to create a more consistent, palatable product, and to improve the marbling in the meat. Initially, most of our sales will be word-of-mouth and internet based. We will also do press releases when that time comes.