

# Growing Green

## Producing Beef for Green Consumers

### Leavitt Lake Ranches

#### Darrell, Callie, Ramsey and Dallice Wood - Vina and Susanville



Darrell with his daughter Dallice

Imagine summers spent in the high mountain meadows with lush green grass and cool streams and winters in the mild climate of the Sacramento Valley in rolling foothills blanketed with wildflowers each spring. It's not just a dream – it's a distinct possibility. It's also how Leavitt Lake Ranches' 700 head of Angus cattle live.

In what some may say is a dying industry, this ranching family has found a way to be prosperous and environmentally conscious simultaneously. Darrell and Callie Wood ranch alongside their 20-something-year-old children in Vina and Susanville. The kids, Ramsey and Dallice, are the sixth generation growing cattle on the same land Darrell's family owned and managed in the 1800s.

This family ranching operation began back when Darrell's great-great-grandfather Dennis decided to earn a living by raising cattle near California's Nevada City, located in the Sierra Nevadas. A lifestyle that has its challenges, legend has it that one of Dennis's challenges included having a herd succumb to a particularly harsh mountain winter that left no forage for cattle. This did not set him back and three years later he drove a herd to Susanville where he began selling his fresh beef to nearby towns.

Flash forward to today, where Darrell and his family are selling cattle raised in the same tradition as their ancestors. As one of the founders of Panorama™ Organic Grass-Fed Beef, the Woods market their cattle along, with other ranchers, to grocery stores and local fine restaurants.

The Angus cattle spend the winter months on 10,000 acres of owned and leased grasslands about 90 miles north of Sacramento. As the grass begins to turn brown and spring turns to summer, cattle are shipped to 50,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) permits and deeded land in the Sierra Nevadas near Susanville in Lassen County.

### Improved our state's natural resources and gone green, to meet consumer demand

The cattle graze on certified organic land, from lower elevation ground to higher ground to promote regeneration of grasses they will take advantage of next season. A move that prevents overgrazing. This movement of livestock is very similar to that of the historic grazers that used to roam California, including species of elk, bison, pronghorns and mammoths.

Darrell's conservation work on private ground, public land and property owned by The Nature Conservancy attest to his proactive management attitude. By working with a variety of partners, Darrell has ecologically improved the land to benefit water quality, wildlife and the economics of his ranching operation.

"It is like an oasis," Darrell proudly states. "The Pete's Valley Ranch is green throughout the entire grazing season."

As he talks in greater detail about Pete's Valley Ranch, a privately-owned property near Susanville, he reflects on the improvements he has made over the past 15 years since acquiring the property.

Working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), California Waterfowl Association and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, a multitude of features have been improved on the land.

One of those improvements includes the restoration of the hydrologic function of the land to restore a meadow. While the land was once a dehydrated piece of property, this group of partners placed the creek back in its historic channel and increased water reservoir storage capacity to provide flows almost year-round. Along the creek, willows and cottonwoods were planted to assist with stream bank stability and provide shade to keep the water cool.

"On this project, the rancher did more than the minimal requirements; he set aside a large chunk of land just for wildlife," states Dan Strait, USFWS partners program biologist who worked on the Pete's Valley Ranch restoration. "This project is more than about doing the right thing for the land. Darrell has told me time and again that it has benefited his bottom line."

With a little bit of management by mankind, the land is restoring itself. Deep head cuts in the stream are now self-repairing, native meadow grasses have re-established themselves naturally and the water table has risen from deeper than 10 feet to only 3-4 feet.

"A big problem on this ranch was the fencing," recalls Dar-

## PARTNERS

- Bureau of Land Management
- California Waterfowl Association
- Ducks Unlimited
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- The Nature Conservancy
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



RIGHT: Pete's Valley Ranch reservoir, demonstrating increased water capacity.

LEFT: Restored meadow on the Pete's Valley Ranch that utilizes reservoir water to maintain hydrologic functions.

rell. "We needed to get control of our own cattle and fence out the neighbor's cattle that were congregating on the property."

Using the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program and other matching funds, Darrell installed fencing to address the management problems in this privately-owned valley. Specifically, the riparian areas were fenced and are now grazed only for a limited time in the fall. This takes place after the water has receded and grass in other portions of the ranch has died off.

The Wood family also installed cross-fencing, allowing for implementation of a rotational grazing regime. After monitoring with photos taken annually at specific locations on the ranch, evaluation of species composition and comparing grazing enclosures to the actively managed land, all partners have seen the vegetation diversify, while forage quality and quantity has improved, benefiting wildlife as well as livestock.

For Darrell, the monitoring is important. "The enclosures show that we need to graze," he says. "But our partners won't agree unless we have the evidence to back it up."

On the public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) adjacent to the Pete's Valley Ranch oasis, Darrell and his family have invested their own financial resources to improve the rangeland. Cross-fencing has been installed so the cattle are better controlled, thus preventing overgrazing. In addition, water troughs have been installed to provide reliable watering sources for livestock and wildlife during the rainless summers in the mountains.

Down in the Sacramento Valley, the Wood family grazes The Nature Conservancy Vina Plains Preserve. This is a working ranch that was purchased in 1982 by the conservation organization with the intent to protect it from ranching. Today, Darrell's cattle are

part of the conservation plan on the land for the benefit of vernal pools. Research has found that cattle are essential to preserving this ecosystem by managing populations of invasive plants, such as starthistle, that can out-compete the natives that are endemic to vernal pools.

Just down the road from The Nature Conservancy property in the valley, Darrell works with partners such as Ducks Unlimited and USFWS' Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program on the family's private property to improve water quality and quantity on the ranch. Riparian areas on the ranch have been fenced to facilitate cattle distribution throughout the property, a pond has been rebuilt to continue to provide water during the tail end of the spring and a settling basin was created to filter sediment from winter run-off.

"You can always do more for the land," notes Darrell as he begins to discuss his future plans for the land his cattle graze.

Future projects include exploring the feasibility of removing invasive juniper trees on BLM land and working with Ducks Unlimited to install a duck pond.

Darrell has raised his family on these ranches, grown grass to feed his cattle, improved our state's natural resources and gone green, to meet consumer demand. With the implementation of conservation practices through longstanding partnerships, Darrell has watched his land improve as well as his cattle business.

"By working with partners I have been able to make improvements to the land that would not be financially feasible otherwise," states Darrell. "I have watched these improvements benefit the land, but also contribute to the family ranching operation's financial stability."

