


ANGUS & AGROECOLOGY

Adapting cattle to their environment is the name of the game and Indreland Angus is at the forefront of it all. Regenerative agriculture that is, in Big Timber, Mont. When it comes to Indreland's cattle and acres of pasture, what you see is what you get.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor



With the Crazy Mountains (“Crazies”) as their backdrop to the west, Indreland Angus thrives almost exclusively off pasture forage. Living in what Roger Indreland, third-generation cattleman at Indreland Angus, calls his wind tunnel keeps the forage uncovered almost all winter long. The Beartooth Mountains provide the southern block for funneling the wind through.

“The wind bares out a lot of our ground and makes the feed accessible, that is how we can winter our cattle out so well,” Roger says, as his wife, Betsy, and youngest daughter Kate nod in agreement. “We are very unique cattle ranchers, the list of things we do differently is long.”

Part of that list is allowing Mother Nature to weed out the animals that cannot produce without supplemental feed. This relates to the guiding principles of the ranch — low inputs. This translates to their yet-to-be-realized goal of feeding zero hay.

“Last year was a rough winter,” Roger says. “With four feet of snow, we had to feed about a month’s worth of hay. We stockpile forage throughout the summer so there is something for the cattle to eat, they just have to get to it through the snow.”

That proved difficult last year with the heaps of snow covering central Montana.



PATTERNED PASTURE

“If we get our soil right, our plants will be adequate forage for our cattle,” Roger says, referring to the key to their pasture-only feeding program. “We are just barely scratching the surface on what we can do with our soil health where mineral would become unnecessary.”

It all started with soil tests encompassing more than just the typical nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium (NPK) levels in the area. Roger and Betsy recognized they needed an expert to truly optimize their ground’s growth.

“We met Nicole Masters, an agroecologist from New Zealand, through the Ranching for Profit Schools based out of Fairfield, California,” Roger says. “She has not only consulted for us, but also helped us understand soil health and how to enhance it on our operation.”

This dedication to soil improvement prompted their youngest daughter Kate to pursue a degree in the same field at the University of Montana-Missoula starting this fall.

“We look at cattle as a tool to improve our general landscape health, specifically in the soil,” Roger explains. Adding that good soil health comes from the diversity of plant and wildlife as well as water quality. “It is all a system, a circle.”

After returning to the ranch full-time, it was the push and pull of each day when Roger and Betsy started to feel like they were just forcing production. It was then they decided the “mainstream ranching paradigm” of high inputs and a demanding work environment was not the ticket to success for them.

PARADIGM SHIFT

“We believe calving is the cow’s job, not ours,” explains Roger of how first-calf heifers lie down and have their babies alongside the veteran cows of the herd. Open-range calving is the catalyst behind intensive selection for calving ease.

The progressive adaption from the typical ranching plan of their cow herd started with the calving date. Straying from the frigid February due dates finds Indreland calves hitting the ground starting on May 1.

“Our calving date matches our growing season,

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that is when our cows hit their peak nutritional needs,” Roger says. “That is something we have worked hard at — getting our cattle to match their environment as best as we can.”

There are no midnight checks for calving difficulty, these cattle are bred to survive and thrive on the range, in all aspects.

“Running cattle without supplemental feed and a certain body condition are far from what producers are used to,” Roger says. “The kind of cow that survives here is not the one that looks for the cake bucket. We need cows that can take care of themselves in a sense.”

Roger has seen the intelligence difference between a cow that needs taken care of and one that does not. His operation calls for the latter.

“There is a huge difference between cows that know what is going on and proactively address the situation for themselves and those that do not,” Roger explains of the types of cows he needs filling his pastures.

Since so many factors play into figuring out which cattle can survive in this type of environment, Roger mostly relies on Mother Nature to sort those animals out for him.

“DNA work is progressive and moves decisions in a certain direction, but those sorts cannot be made on paper,” Roger adds.

PLOP IT LIKE IT’S HOT

Everything going on beneath Roger’s feet keeps him moving the ranch forward today.

Eight years ago they quit using pour-ons for fly control and dung beetles showed back up.

“We went from having one species to having 4-5,” Roger says of how the beetles help break down the manure in the pasture.

Indreland’s no longer need to drag their pastures to spread manure. The beetles break it down enough to fertilize the soil and, to some degree, help control the fly cycle. Though the more useful manure is not all the land needs.

“Nicole interprets the total mineral analysis of

our land because it is so complex,” Rogers jokes, saying that he is not qualified for the job. “We have needed both copper and boron but that is not just readily available at the farm store.”

Low on boron and options, Roger built his own

sprayer specifically to put the product on his pastures. The liquid source simply is not as good, so adapt and overcome is what the Indrelands did.

“We have also used fish oil to jump-start the soil biology to give the system a chance to work,” Roger continues. “It is

really neat, you could write a whole book on fish oil.”

That is exactly what Nicole is doing.

Understanding the ideas and principles is key, and knowing each action has a reaction. Living in a harsh environment quickly teaches its residents the consequences of their actions, good and bad.

“It is important to encourage air and water to go into the soil,” Roger says of Big Sky Country, noting they are in no way short of air. “Water is our limiting factor. We have a 90-day growing season with an annual rainfall of only 14 inches.”

This small window is all they get to grow the forage that has to last them all year.

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Aside from birth weight (BW) and calving ease direct (CED) expected progeny differences (EPDs), Roger focuses on the cow energy value (\$EN). This index value was designed by the American Angus Association as a tool for producers to economically match cattle to their environment.

“I am pretty sure if you summarized our cow herd, we would be one of the best \$EN herds in the nation,” Roger says. “That is just a result of cattle adapting to their environment, \$EN is not our goal; just a fringe benefit.”

Although, flipping through sale ads or seedstock magazines puts Roger at a disadvantage when it comes to choosing cattle.

“They don’t publish the \$EN values and then I don’t have much to make a decision on,” Roger

“Resilience in the cattle,
resilience in the landscape.”
– Roger Indreland

Indreland roots run deep as Roger's maternal grandfather Arch Ginther was a founding member of the Montana Angus Association. Both Anne and Kate, Roger and Betsy's daughters, have always been active members of the ranch and own cattle still in the operation today.



explains. "It is interesting to me that Angus puts it out there, yet there is limited use of it."

By relying solely on the environment for their forage, these cattle do give up some production. Selling top-dollar cattle is not the goal though.

In fact, their mission statement reads "To provide genetics and services that help cattle producers attain more freedom and profitability in their business and life."

Part of this freedom comes from allowing cattle to function on their own, but also from simplifying their practices. One of those coming just after birth.

"During calving we move cows ahead that have not calved yet, leaving the pairs behind," Roger says. This is in about five- to eight-day increments. "Around here almost everyone pairs out every day, taking the cows and calves away from the cattle that are still calving."

Roger has basically inverted the entire system. The cows "without baggage" come to the pasture gates first anyway, leaving the pairs behind.

"This is called the Nebraska Sandhills calving method, and it is pretty simple really," Roger says. "The other thing this accomplishes is all the calves in the pasture are born within a week of each other so they are about the same age."

From a health perspective, new calves are dropped on fresh ground to prevent the spread of

disease through the entire herd. Each pasture is between 200 and 400 acres in size to accommodate all the pairs.

Regenerative grazing keeps these smaller pastures sustainable for year-round forage production.

"One of the most important things for us in this situation is adaptive grazing," Roger explains of the delicate system they use to preserve their natural resource. "You have to give the land rest so the cattle don't come back and take a second bite when something is trying to regrow."

Damage to the root system is detrimental to the longevity of a plant. It is something Roger and Betsy try to avoid at all costs.

NICHE MARKET

The distinct layout of Indreland Angus allows them a unique avenue for marketing. The longevity of their animals is a major selling point.

"Our bulls don't look like other people's bulls of the same age," Roger explains of the animals they allow to grow out until 18 months before selling compared to only growing for a year. Finishing bulls out completely on forage takes longer, but it ensures they hold themselves together when turned out on cows in a pasture.

"I have been selling bulls since I was in high school," Roger says. "We used to sell everything

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private treaty but it got to be hard to figure out how to give everyone a fair shot using that method.”

They gave both silent and live auctions a try before settling on a unique online live video format. Though it is primarily an Internet auction, buyers can still come out to the ranch and bid from the floor. Since the sale is annually held in early December, a virtual sale is ideal.

“We have a couple of days for an open house before the sale to give people flexibility to come see our herd, that is important,” he adds.

Selling about one bull every 45 seconds keeps the sale under an hour but they are looking to add ten more bulls to the sale every year.

“We are finding more acceptance of what we are doing,” Roger says. “People are seeing that there is a need for our type of operation. We are finding our niche in the market.”

The family is excited about the future of their operation and the longevity they are creating with these practices. By reducing their inputs, their quality of life has improved as a direct result.

“I am excited about the future of this type of operation. It makes sense to me,” Kate says, the future of innovative cattle ranching. “The resilience of building land, livestock and people is beautiful. It is a neat way to get young people back into agriculture and ranching, and make it profitable.”

MEAT SALES

It was 12 years ago when Roger and Betsy found an itch they needed to scratch, one to increase revenue and capitalize on the steers not making the bull cut.



Kate, the youngest of Roger and Betsy's two daughters, reminisces on her days in the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) with her show-heifer-turned-momma cow.

“We just sold at farmers markets or directly to people, stores and restaurants at first,” Betsy says.

Their sizzling secret is in the dry-aging process and specialty packing geared towards sustaining an entire family on various cuts. Their local Extension agent grades each carcass before it is sliced into familiar cuts of beef.

“We market our beef as a premium product with no growth hormones,” Betsy says. “People just like to know where their food is coming from and we try to fulfill that.”

Indreland Beef was rebranded in the past couple years to Crazy Peak Montana Beef. They always put the tag number of the animal the meat came from on the packaging to connect consumers to the meat.

“Each product is all from just one animal, nothing is ever combined,” Betsy explains.

They are at a crossroads with the program where they need to expand and operate it to its full potential to truly reap the benefits.

“To stand across the table from a consumer is very important,” Betsy says. “They like to buy from a small family ranch and know they are helping someone stay on the land.” **AJ**

Crazy Peak Montana Beef is a way for Indreland Angus to connect directly to the consumer. Stamped with the tag number of the animal each cut of beef came from, consumers get that “home-grown” connection to their meat.