

Doing the RiGHT Thing—The McNeil Ranch

by Rio de la Vista

What underlies a successful, holistically managed ranching operation? How does a family in a high altitude, 6- to 8-inch (15- to 21-cm) rainfall valley in southern Colorado win national awards for their progressive management?

If there is one common denominator in these questions, it seems to be the willingness and ability to change with the times and respond effectively to the demands of the day while looking into the future. And that's how the McNeil family have protected a heritage of 100 plus years of ranching on the Rock Creek Drainage on the southwestern slope of the San Luis Valley (SLV) in South Central Colorado.

Waking Up From Tradition

The McNeil family originally moved to Colorado from Virginia in 1890. Today, the ranch is run by the fourth and fifth generations of McNeils: Mike, with his wife, Cathy, their 13-year-old daughter, Kelly, and nephew, Michael, along with two long time employees. They run 800 mother cows on 3,033 acres (1,228 hectares), with approximately 1,200 of those acres irrigated. In the past, they have also run their cattle on an approximately 30,000-acre (12,146-hectare) summer grazing permit in the nearby National Forest.

As a young boy, Mike spent summers irrigating hay fields, driving tractors to harvest 3,000 tons of hay or riding the herd in the high country range. He spent the cold winters of his youth feeding that same hay to the herd and, in the tradition of the area, calving in the deep freeze of January. He also studied agriculture briefly at Colorado State University until the bottom fell out of the cattle market, and he returned home.

When Mike's father, Bill, passed away in 1983, the family had to deal with the challenges of inter-generational land transfer issues, especially the looming estate taxes. They were able to take financial planning steps to protect the family and the ranch, albeit through some extreme and very expensive measures.

Then, in the drought of 1989, the Forest

Service told them they had to remove half their herd from their grazing allotment. Such an unexpected situation could well have been disastrous, but some summer rains saved them at the last minute. This "wake up" call made them realize that "business as usual" was getting more and more risky, if not downright untenable.

So Mike and Cathy began to explore other options and new ways to manage their ranch. Having heard about "HRM" (Holistic Resource Management) and thinking it was "a way to double their stocking rate," they decided to learn more about it. They began to study various alternative approaches, with their training in Holistic Management providing a framework for integrating these new ideas and practices into their operation.



Sandhill cranes rising from the waters of the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge. The McNeils have worked with this refuge over the past five years to help protect the water rights in the area as part of their conservation efforts.

Rather than try to make immediate changes in their livestock operations, they realized that the real "logjam" at the time was in their family. So their first "new idea" was to address family issues and begin to heal some of the schisms that existed. Difficult and challenging as it was, over time and through honest communication and family meetings, many old issues were resolved and this led to a more creative and relaxed environment.

Greater Sustainability

From there, the McNeils began to make gradual changes in the actual operation of the ranch itself. Over the years, they began to graze

more and more of the hay fields, cycling them in and out of hay production. They also reduced the amount of hay they cut and returned to an old-time practice of simply cutting the hay into windrows and piling it with a dump rake rather than putting up bales. In this way, they could use portable electric fence to dole the hay out to the cattle. However, the McNeils plan their grazing to allow sufficient regrowth so the cattle can go through the pastures and find adequate standing forage in most seasons.

The McNeils have also changed their calving season to a June/July calving so that their 800 mother cows can be dry and pregnant through the cold months and be on fresh green growth and warmer temperatures during calving, lactating and rebreeding. This change has also greatly enhanced the McNeils' quality of life.

As Mike likes to relate, "I used to say that I wished I lived somewhere where we didn't have to put up hay all summer and calve in January. Then I finally realized, I live in that place!"

To further enhance their quality of life, the McNeils have decided to take "non-use" on their Forest Service grazing permit (which they have used to summer graze 600 yearlings in the past) and run the entire herd on their own land. With their many years of experience and very careful Holistic Management™ grazing planning, they are confident the land can carry this increased number of

animals and sustain the health of the grasses and biodiversity at the same time.

A Better Quality of Land and Life

All of these management changes have led to very measurable improvements in the McNeil's lives and land. From a production standpoint, their enhanced planning has allowed them to sustainably increase the carrying capacity of their land by approximately 30 percent—perhaps even more. The earlier panic of how to feed their livestock is long gone and their independence from public lands gives them a real sense of security given the political and social pressures

continued on page 8

Doing the RiGHT Thing—The McNeil Ranch

continued from page 7

on public lands grazing in the U.S.

From a financial standpoint, they have stabilized their operation, kept the entire ranch intact, and remained debt free, (even when Mike's mother passed away and they had to deal with a massive inheritance tax). They have cut their annual operating expenses by about 20 percent since 1991, operating the same ranch with more cattle for about \$60,000 less per year while paying their help the best wages of anyone in the area. All of their employees continue to receive training in Holistic Management and other progressive management ideas and are involved in the financial, grazing and infrastructure planning, and biological monitoring.

Changes in the Community

While their own land base and operation became more stable, profitable, and increasingly healthy, the McNeils could not ignore the forces of change going on around them. They watched the intensifying second-home growth and development pressures that are resulting in tremendous loss of agricultural lands and water throughout the state of Colorado.

The impacts came very close to home as the McNeils realized that the Rock Creek Drainage was one of very few undeveloped stream corridors remaining in the entire 8,000-square-mile (3,239-square-hectare) basin. With upstream neighbors threatening to sell out to developers for subdivisions, they conceived a project that could include all the landowners in the drainage in a collective conservation effort through a combination of donations and sales of development rights. The Rock Creek Heritage Project has now been underway for three years and is working to protect approximately 15,000 acres (6,073 hectares) and associated water rights adjacent to the 14,000-acre (5,668-hectare) Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge over the next three to five years.

The startup of this landowner initiative was originally supported by The Nature Conservancy and the Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) Trust Fund through a capacity building grant which funded landowner education and initial negotiations for donation and purchase of conservation easements with participating ranchers. Because of the outstanding opportunity to protect a significant block of agricultural land and water rights, as well as exceptional wildlife habitat, American Farmland

Trust is now backing the effort through support of a local project coordinator and direct land protection efforts.

The list of partnering organizations now also include: the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Ducks Unlimited, the Trust for Public Land, Colorado Wetlands Partnership and the SLV Wetlands Focus Area Committee, Colorado Division of Wildlife, the SLV GIS/GPS Authority, Colorado Cattlemens Agricultural Land Trust, the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, and many more.

"I used to say that I wished I lived somewhere where we didn't have to put up hay all summer and calve in January. Then I finally realized, I live in that place!"

At the same time the Rock Creek Heritage Project was developing, it became clear to the McNeils and their colleagues that they also needed a local land trust to work throughout the San Luis Valley for protection of agricultural land and water. As the founding President of the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT), (See *IN PRACTICE* #70) Cathy McNeil has brought her rigorous thinking, contagious enthusiasm and the family's good community standing as long-term land owners and successful ranchers to the effort. In partnership with the many national and regional conservation organizations that are also working to conserve the tremendous ecological and agricultural resources of the Valley, RiGHT also offers educational and management help (including Holistic Management training).

Making A Difference

The McNeils' work on the land and in their community has not been ignored. In 1999 they received statewide recognition for the health of their land when they were named "Conservationist of the Year for Ranching" by the Colorado Association of Soil Conservation Districts.

In 2001, the McNeils also received national recognition for their community contributions and good stewardship when they were named American Farmland Trust's "2001 Steward of the Land." The McNeils were selected from more than 75 farmers and ranchers from 35 states because of their efforts "to stop the loss of productive farmland and promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment."

The McNeils were also honored by the Environmental Law Institute for their contribution to wetlands protection, restoration, and education and were named winners of the 2001 National Wetlands Award in the Land Stewardship and Development category.

Such awards demonstrate how many lives the McNeils have touched as they have actively shared information about their management practices and sponsored Holistic Management training for other ranchers and agency employees over many years. In the past year alone, three classes have been held for Rock Creek landowners, conservation organization, and government agency personnel and others. These workshops have included everything from basic Holistic Management to riparian restoration using cattle as a tool.

The McNeils are doing their best to manage their own land with innovative and sustainable practices (often against the tide of public opinion and "tradition"). But just as importantly, they are actively sharing creative approaches to resolving local and community-wide problems and creating a viable future for agriculture as they pour their hearts, minds, time, and money into conservation efforts they support.

By first attending to business at home and within their own family, the McNeils have created a foundation for contributing to their community and are helping to restore the land and provide new management and marketing options for land owners throughout the San Luis Valley. In doing so they have created opportunities for many others to participate in agricultural life, conservation, and enjoyment of the land while creating and protecting habitat for the animal and plant life that shares it. Undoubtedly their enthusiasm, creativity, and generosity have touched many people in their community and beyond and will indeed provide a heritage long beyond their years.

Rio de la Vista is a Holistic Management™ Certified Educator and Vice-Chair of the Center's Board of Directors. She is also American Farmland Trust's coordinator for the Rock Creek Heritage Project and can be reached at nodelawista@hotmail.com

