

Livestock

California couple favors ranching in Texas

By DEE ANN CAMERON

WHEN a California couple bought Texas ranchland, they knew next to zero about owning a ranch in Texas. Yet, they sought more property rights than they had in California.

"We bought a ranch in Texas and then realized we didn't know anything about the land or ranching," Richard Taylor admitted to about 75 ranchers from the central Hill Country that recently gathered at his Blue Mountain Peak Ranch near Mason, Texas, for a field day.

Richard and wife Sally purchased the ranch back in 2001 to build a wildlife management operation. They'd been living on the West Coast in Big Sur, Calif., and were new to ranching and wildlife.

They needed help. So they joined the Texas Wildlife Association, and attended wildlife and land management workshops to learn about improving their ranch habitat.

Richard and Sally met Keith Blair, owner of Red Buffalo Land Management Services, while taking a prescribed-burns course. Blair is a Texas-certified prescribed-burn instructor, and his course helped the Taylors learn about their flora, Mother Nature's past influences and land history. Blair also helped the Taylors conduct several prescribed burns.

Blair and TWA recommended that the Taylors contact the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to get more management help and apply for Environmental Quality Incentive Program cost-share assistance to help with expenses. They also suggested the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department as a resource for a wildlife management plan to apply for tax exemptions and for information on land restoration.

Distrust of government

The Taylors were hesitant to get "government help" based on experiences in California.

"We spent eight-and-a-half years trying to get a permit just to build our house in Big Sur, Calif.," Richard laments. "It took 14 government agencies to finally sign all the paperwork needed to get a permit!"

The California nightmare didn't stop. One day, Richard was out walking on the 16 acres around his house when a Monterey County inspector told him that he couldn't walk on his own land.



CLEANING UP: Prescribed burning has been conducted on the Taylor ranch to clear out the understory of brush and open up the rangeland for better wildlife and livestock habitat.

Key Points

- California couple sought more freedom in buying Texas land.
- Richard and Sally Taylor work with agencies in Hill Country.
- They worked with specialists, such as NRCS, to find solutions.



CUTTING COSTS: Richard Taylor, owner of Blue Mountain Peak Ranch, saves money by doing most of his own tree shearing.



BURN TIPS: Keith Blair, owner of Red Buffalo Land Management Services in the Texas Hill Country, talks about prescribed burning.

"I was actually given a ticket for walking across my own land," Richard reveals in amazement. "There was an environmental regulation that said a 'foot path,' which would be created by walking on your land, constituted 'development' and needed the same permits required to build a home. On our own land!" he reflects in disbelief.

The Taylors went through a five-year process to get permits and gain clearance to build a system of footpaths so they could walk across their property.

With private property rights laughable in California, Texas was appealing.

"Ninety-five percent of Texas is private property," Richard notes. "That means Texans are pretty adamant about private property rights. We like that."

Texas was different

Even though they had found land — and Texas laws they could live with — the idea of working with "government agencies" again remained scary. Nevertheless, TWA and Blair kept bringing up TPWD and NRCS as good resources.

"When they told us to go talk to the government about help with our land, I was like, 'Yeah, right!'" Richard quips.

But they finally went to an NRCS meeting in Mason County.

"When we first started going to those meetings," Richard remembers, "we didn't want to sign in because we didn't know yet if we wanted anybody to know we were there. We were very leery of any government agency."

But the Taylors met Matt Kast, district conservationist, USDA-NRCS, Mason field office. With Kast, they developed an overall positive management plan and got sound advice. The Taylors got an EQIP contract based on the ranch's long-term goals compatible with NRCS programs.

It was different from the West Coast.

"I think they reflect the culture and values of the people of Texas. Matt has been just wonderful to work with, and he gets as excited about the progress on our land as we do," Richard assures. "In California, we were used to people who have had a lot of power, but no real knowledge. But everyone we've worked with in the NRCS really knows what they are talking about. They have all been very technically competent people. It's really been a wonderful experience."

"When they first bought the property, it was a cedar thicket," Kast allows. "They have only owned it five years, but have already made a lot of improvements. They have really opened the land up, and it is going to make a good recovery."

People suggested "before and after" pictures. "But that really wouldn't have done any good," Richard laughs. "A 'before' picture would have just been a close-up of a cedar tree because that's all you could see."

Heart-and-soul work

The Taylors call their work a "heart-and-soul project."

They've done prescribed burning, hand cutting and tree shearing to clear brush, and installed a pipeline for livestock water.

The land is deferred from grazing for recovery, but they intend to put cattle on it in the future. But there is one Angus and one longhorn steer, called "Old Tex," that roam the ranch.

The couple has built a hunting cabin, with plans for more lodging. Their goal is to be diversified with livestock, hunting and ecotourism as self-sustaining enterprises. Many photographers have recorded numerous bird species.

TPWD has provided a cowbird trap to improve the songbird population. It also helped the Taylors write a wildlife plan to qualify for the same tax rate as agricultural land.

The Taylors have hosted activities

such as the NRCS range field day to showcase conservation work, and share management solutions to problems like cedar.

"The interesting aspect of the Taylor's management style is that they didn't come in here to see what the land could do for them," Kast notes. "But rather, they wanted to see what they could do for the land. It's been kind of a ranch remodeling project from the ground up, and the results have been very impressive."

For more about the Taylor's ranch, visit their Web site at www.bluemountainpeakranch.com.

Cameron is with NRCS, San Angelo, Texas.



OLD TEX: This longhorn steer roams the Blue Mountain Peak Ranch in Mason County, Texas. Though plans call for a small herd of cattle, the steer is one of only two bovines on the ranch, as grazing is being deferred.

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