

NMCGA ON THE TRAIL

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Holistic Management Practices Prove Favorable at the JX Cattle Co.

Located in Quay County, New Mexico the JX Cattle Company, LLC is owned and operated by Tom and Mimi Sidwell. The ranch was purchased in 2004. In that transaction the Sidwells found opportunity to implement their holistic management knowledge and the ranch received a new start.

Tom's roots in ranching date back over 200 years. That history coupled with the challenges of New Mexico's arid climate and he and his wife Mimi's willingness to continue learning has led to the success of the JX ranch.

"Water in our state is scarce and we soon found out the wells in our area were not very productive," said Tom. "The first project we tackled was developing water."

By constructing numerous miles of pipeline and adding in more watering troughs the Sidwells worked to connect 6 wells together, adding over 100,000 gallons of storage capacity. Areas with storage tanks that were required to feed watering troughs on top of the caprock now utilize solar powered pumps to help pump the water. The Sidwells avoided having to haul water, like many of their neighbors at surrounding ranches, by implementing an updated watering system.

"New Mexico is hot and dry and the wind always blows, which is also hard on water availability," said Tom.

Evaporation of water was an issue the JX faced in sweltering summer months. To combat rising temperatures and persistent winds, they began covering their storage tanks with large fiberglass tops and put shade balls in their watering troughs. These two changes were huge savers. In the harsh conditions a storage tank could lose half of its capacity and watering troughs could lose 2-3 feet.

Cattle and wildlife such as deer, antelope, elk and turkey found on the ranch learned to drink around the shade balls. This new technology floats on the water's surface, therefore animals drink by pushing their noses past the shade balls into the trough. In a 12 foot trough, you can find almost 150 floating shade balls. During the winter months the shade balls also help with ice thickness. As livestock and wildlife drink from the tank, the shade balls rattle about and shatter some of the ice.

Rotational grazing and brush control also contribute to the JX ranch success. Grubbing and spraying mesquite, juniper and cedar trees required countless hours driving equipment in coordination with the expertise of local Natural Resources Conservation Service agents. Invasive plant species such as mesquite, juniper and cedar compete for resources with native grasses. Reduced forage cover meant higher rates of moisture run off from rain and snow. Run-off areas were evident by soil erosion and moisture collection in natural ponds.

There is significant diversity in the JX from the base to the top of the caprock. Since the time of homesteaders, much of the area on top of the caprock was dryland farmed. The ground was repeatedly tilled resulting in a decrease in soil quality and areas of erosion. However, in the 1960's the field areas were planted back to native grasses which in turn have done well under the Sidwells holistic management approach.

Herd capacity on the JX has been reduced due to the ongoing drought, as it was in 2011 due to similar conditions. By turning their operation from a handful of large pastures to 30 smaller ones the Sidwells rotational graze their herd. Each pasture

receives 130 days of recovery time to regrow and build its roots system. Cattle on the JX typically graze each pasture for 4 days before being moved. The new watering system also allows the water to be moved with the herd.

The ranch has seen an uptake in forage health and regrowth as well as the introduction of a variety of forage species. The JX is home to: Western Wheat, Plains Bristle Grass, Arizona Cotton Top Grass, Blue Stem and Indian Grasses. A large amount of care and advanced planning goes into creating the grazing schedule, which is dependent upon several variables: weather conditions, herd size and health and forage availability. Tom and Mimi consistently monitor the ranch to make the best management decisions possible for the land and their herd.

“Part of the key to rotational grazing is knowing your grasses,” said Tom. “Timing and the impact your cattle have from one pasture to the next helps you to learn that.”

Consultants routinely visit the JX to confirm the successes of the Sidwells holistic management approach. New Mexico consulting geologist, Dr. Kate Zeigler has visited multiple times over the years to measure the static water level in the ranch wells. Zeigler reported that over the past 6 years the water level has rose anywhere from 1-3 feet. The Sidwells are happy to see that their management choices have benefitted the ranch, as water is no longer running off but is rather collecting in new forage growth and going back into the ground. In fact, infiltration of water into the soil on the JX was 23% faster than rates found in continuously grazed soil. The Sidwells observations of less runoff and replenishment of forages was also confirmed when they learned that over a 10+ year period there was an 11% increase in nitrogen, and 38% more carbon sequestered in JX soil due to rotational grazing.

“We are fortunate to have Tom and Mimi as part of our association,” said Randell Major, NMCGA President. “They are tremendous examples of ranchland stewards in New Mexico.”

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