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# The Path Back to Grass

The strategy at Indreland Angus near Big Timber, Montana is focused on grass-based genetics to provide their bull customers with Angus seedstock ready to turn grass into beef. Their mature cows average around 1,135 pounds.

## These Montana ranchers figured they needed to make some changes around the outfit... one step at a time

**A**merica's natural heritage of the rural landscape is blessed with the cultural heritage that ranchers practice each day.

That ranching heritage is what Roger and Betsy Indreland have accomplished at Indreland Angus near Big Timber, Montana. A focus on grass-based genetics provides their bull customers with Angus seedstock ready to turn grass into beef.

"Our objective is to develop a family business people enjoy and one that provides opportunities for future generations," Roger states. "I used to think that I could figure it out in the next few years. As we've gotten older, I've learned it will always be a work in progress."

"I'm a big believer in the tradition and heritage that goes with ranching. There's a balance in how you approach things. The mindset of 'we've always done it this way' is OK in a lot of cases," Roger continues. "On the other hand it's certainly worth looking at other ideas and exploring new opportunities. When you do that, most of us in the ranching business don't know where to go. We found it very valuable to use outside professionals who are specific to different areas to give us ideas or advice."

In what might seem to be a less traditional approach, the Indrelands focus on management practices that provide them more daily freedom from their operation. They start each morning – especially during winter – like many fellow ranchers with a warm cup of coffee. But you won't find them rushed to get behind the wheel of the feed truck or tractor to tend to the cows. Decades of careful grass management and genetic selection has allowed the Indrelands to worry more about education, business decisions and beef marketing plans on most cold, wintery mornings.

### A LOOK BACK

As generational stockmen, Roger's parents moved across to the east side of the Crazy Mountains in 1968 to make their own stake raising commercial Angus. It wasn't a far stretch for Roger to gain interest in seedstock Angus as a teenager. His maternal grandparents are included in the handful of founders of the Montana Angus Association.

Not long after the Indrelands called Big Timber area home, Betsy's family moved from New Jersey in 1972. Roger and Betsy earned degrees from Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman, and the couple married in 1986.

By 1989, Roger's parents were ready to slow down and they allowed the new-lweds to lease the family ranch with the option to buy, which the young couple soon did. They bought more registered Angus females from a neighbor as well as Leachman Angus Ranch, who Roger worked for while at MSU.

"After college we did construction work and ranched until we could get our feet on the ground. We were pretty much mainstream with our program trying to keep up with the fast-paced world until the early to mid-1990s," Roger recalls. Admitting they were never "cutting edge," they were like most ranches seeking current and popular bloodlines for the cow herd. They calved in late January and early February, fed their fair share of hay through the winter, and sold yearling bulls.

"We were using genetics to try and keep up with the current EPDs and the performance side of it from a pounds perspective. Then we started to analyze what it was really costing us. That's when we started to realize that maybe we could do things a lot differently and a lot cheaper."

To raise seedstock cattle that fit their environment in a low cost, low input system, the Indrelands knew they needed to change. Some of the changes would





**Roger and Betsy Indreland know the beef they raise meets certain consumer expectations. For nearly a decade they've been selling their own Indreland Ranch Angus Beef at farmers markets and online. Annually, they market between 35 and 40 head. "Mostly it's our cattle that haven't made the grade in our seedstock program," says Roger.**

veer them down a path less traveled, but not foreign to the wind-swept range they call home. The east side of the Crazies provides hilly grasslands but lacks an abundance of field crops for winter residue and feed. It wasn't about abandoning tradition for them, but more about finding what would work best for the natural heritage and turning that grass into beef.

### **"IT'S ONE THING AT A TIME."**

Even though they began making changes on their own, Roger and Betsy grew interested in a new way to look at

their ranching business and decided to seek an outside resource. The couple attended a Ranching for Profit School presented by Ranch Management Consultants, taught by Dave Pratt, and for the first time took a look at their operation from an economic standpoint. Economics asks the question, 'Is it profitable?' Finance asks the question, 'Can I afford to do it?'

"Something can be very profitable, but if you can't come up with the start-up money, then it doesn't matter because you won't be able to do it. Likewise, if the cash flow is too low to

meet your obligations, you can go broke making a profit," Betsy quotes Pratt. "The classic example is land appreciation – it makes us wealthy on the balance sheet but broke at the bank. Economics also includes non-cash costs such as unpaid labor, opportunity interest on the cows and opportunity rent on the land."

No matter if it's calves produced or grass production, that cost and the profit or loss associated doesn't stop without a complete exit from the business, something most cattlemen, including the Indrelands, do not seek.

"If you stop a factory, your costs stop," Roger says. "With ranching, if you don't do anything at all you're still going to have some form of production."

Overhead is a big money drain, Roger admits, and it's not likely buildings, labor and equipment will get any cheaper. As Roger and Betsy began evaluating the costs associated with their business, some of the "we've always done it this way" practices came under scrutiny.

"We always had to calve early to get yearling bulls developed and big enough to sell, and that's what we were doing," Roger says. "So the first thing we did was start keeping the younger bulls over as two year-olds. At that time we marketed our bulls private treaty."

It took a couple of years of retaining younger bulls to sell as two year-olds, while still providing some yearling bulls to fulfill their bull buyers' needs. At the same time they were growing

their cow herd in an effort to make a seamless switch for their customers.

"That's a big transformation because you're giving up that income for that year," Roger adds. "You're holding those bulls for another year so you've got to figure out where they're going to be so that they're not causing you issues."

They were then able to start moving their calving date towards April and May to take advantage of Mother Nature's more favorable spring weather. They also began experimenting with developing the bulls on forage.

"You have another year to get them developed. There's no need to pour a bunch of cost into them early on when they can do it on grass way cheaper," he says.

About 80 two year-old forage-developed bulls are sold annually at the ranch in December, and they use Frontier Stockyards as an online marketing agent. This year's sale is set for December 15th. Grazing has been a true test on their genetics from the bulls to the mature cow herd.

"We've phased out feeding cows. With just about every management change, we've found that some of the

cattle just didn't fit that change," Roger relates. "When you change your feed program in a cow herd there are consequences. If you just change completely all at once, you're going to have devastating results. We've stepped these things in a little at a time."

In this process, Roger quickly realized there was no real measurement for fertility in the industry.

"When we started running our cattle and putting pressure on them the first thing that failed was the fertility. When you take two year-old heifers that calved and turn them out with the cow herd and don't give them special treatment, the fallout rate was huge," he states.

It was also obvious to him that genetic changes needed to be made, and a smaller mature cow weight was crucial. The Indrelands' mature cow size is smaller now, but the cow numbers increased, maintaining – if not increasing – grass to beef production. Weights from the past three years show two year-old females weighing 885 pounds, three year-olds at 934 pounds and four year-olds and older averaging 1,135 pounds.

"Our heifer calves are weaned and then turned out in the hills. They

have to learn how to live from what their mothers taught them," Roger shares. "We breed them for 30 days and keep what's bred. We've made the ability of a heifer to get bred a huge selection criteria by doing that."

The Indrelands use line breeding to produce half- and three-quarter-blood seedstock and, coupled with older Angus bloodlines, the strategy has allowed them to achieve a smaller mature cow.

"If you took a cow herd that had been calved in February forever and fed two or three tons of hay over the winter and you turned them out with bulls to make them late April or May calvers, you'd have a fallout in breed back," Roger warns. "If you took feed away at the same time, you'd have another fallout. You need to do it one step at a time or I'm pretty sure that you could have well over 50 percent of your cow herd gone. People can't afford to do that. It's one thing at a time and one step at a time."

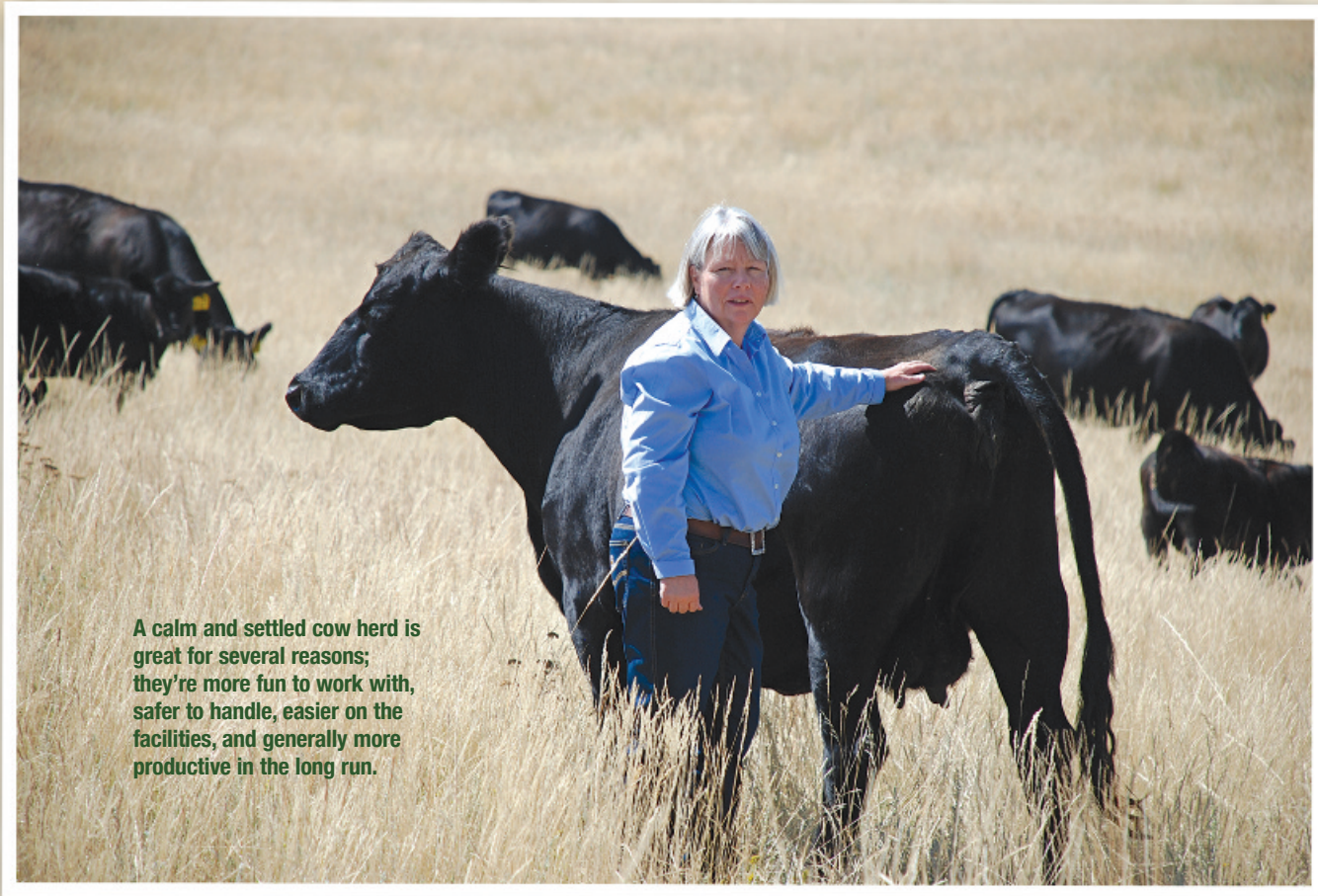
### **GRAZING CYCLE**

The Indrelands' grazing system utilizes practices that allow for protein and energy management and provides stockpiled feed for winter.

**No shortage of grass on this outfit on a good year.**

**The Indrelands offer around 80 two year-old forage-developed bulls at their December sale on the ranch. Check out [www.indrelandranch.com](http://www.indrelandranch.com) when you get a chance.**





A calm and settled cow herd is great for several reasons; they're more fun to work with, safer to handle, easier on the facilities, and generally more productive in the long run.

Winter pastures receive no summer grazers to allow for full plant diversity for winter feed, and the Indrelands try to take no more than half of the year's production on irrigated and native pastures alike. Water is the limiting resource on most meadows, especially in native range.

Come December or January, the cow herd is split in half with the youngest and oldest females in one group and middle-aged cows in another bunch. The young/mature group moves through the winter graze first for 10 days to 2 weeks to get the best and first pickings of the stockpiled forage.

"With stockpiled feeds, if you leave them for very long, they're going to get all the best out first. It's just like a kid in a candy store. He's going to get what he likes first. If you leave him in there for too long, pretty soon he's going to wind up eating crackers," Roger explains.

Right ahead of calving, the cow herd joins back up. During calving, Betsy says, they rotate cattle through a series of pastures so they go to fresh feed every 10 days to 2 weeks.

Cell grazing has allowed the Indrelands to more closely study their forage and find ways to continue to improve their paddocks ranging from native pastures of 100-150 acres to several 5- to 7-acre paddocks on flood-irrigated ground.

On occasion, Old Man Winter requires a little extra attention. Intense snowfall last winter meant they had to feed the cows for six days. From years of feeding and core sampling hay, they know in late summer and fall protein may also fall short. For Roger, it's a matter of watching what's going on rather than trying to figure out how many bales of hay might be needed.

"I really watch the cattle in late summer and going into fall because as grass cures out protein starts to go away," Roger points out. "In years where we've had a lot of spring moisture and a lot of early growth, that tends to make the grass look nice, but there's not as much overall nutrition in that growth. In those cases I will use protein blocks on the young cows and occasionally on the main group of middle-aged cows as well."

In a year-round grazing cycle, Roger

says the cow herd has to be able to push production on leaner means and gain when the greener opportunity arises.

"The cows put on weight as soon as the grass greens up, and they continue to put on weight and maintain throughout the summer and into the fall. We'll wean calves in December or January. The cows will have a little bump in weight in January after their calves come off depending on the weather," Roger says. "From that point on they'll lose one body condition score during the second and third trimester of pregnancy. Typically by late April, we're just starting to green up and more protein is available as we go to fresh feed. Through calving, the cows maintain and gain depending on how soon things start to green up.

"The ability of the cow herd to do that really translates into the carcass side. Animals deposit fat in the order of (1) organ fat, (2) marbling and then (3) external (rib) fat, and they take it off in reverse order," he adds. "If they're stressed from a predator attack, the energy from the organ fat gets them through that. If they're stressed from a storm, that's when the marbling fat

comes out, and it comes out pretty quick. The long-term effects from stress are more related to body condition scores with rib and external fat.

"Normally when we see a cow slipping in body condition, it's because she's been stressed for quite some time," he continues. "Cows with the ability to put that fat on and take it off again through the way they're managed lends itself well to cattle that grade and finish well."

### GRASS TO BEEF

As cattlemen, ranching is really about meeting the expectations of what consumers want on the dinner plate, and the Indrelands know the beef they raise meets expectations. They've been selling their own *Indreland Ranch Angus Beef* at farmers markets and online for nearly a decade now, which has given them insight on how their cattle finish on the rail.

"We market between 35 and 40 head through our branded beef program. Mostly it's our cattle that haven't made the grade in our seed-stock program," Roger says, adding that a dry yearling heifer is the ideal candidate to finish at an ideal size with good marbling.

Betsy has put in long hours marketing their beef and has found it to be an eye-opening experience to learn what some consumers desire. They want a local product, one that has no added ingredients and no growth hormones, and they like to know how the cattle have been handled, she reports. They've also found an opportunity to educate consumers about practices that are required to achieve that juicy, dry aged, consistent steak.

"I've seen a trend where people want grass-fed, but they're finding it's not consistently good," Roger says. "They're looking for that good eating experience, and they're learning that corn-finished will provide that."

Consumers are willing to pay for the product they demand, and the Indrelands finish their beef on whole corn and long stem hay. *Indreland* ground beef sells for \$8 per pound – a price they haven't raised for almost two years. Tenderloins sell out at \$34 for two, 5-ounce steaks.

"People realize it is expensive but we've been trying to balance supply



Learning what some consumers expect in a beef-eating experience has been an eye-opener for the Indrelands since they started offering their own ranch-raised product. Generally, their customers are searching for local beef that has no added ingredients, and they like to know how the cattle have been handled. They are also willing to pay for the product they demand. The Indrelands finish their beef on whole corn and long stem hay. *Indreland Ranch* ground beef sells for \$8 per pound, and this 10 oz. *New York Steak* goes for \$20.



and demand. We're not going to do all the work if it's not profitable," Roger adds.

### BUILDING THE FUTURE

While Roger and Betsy realize the exact picture of their operation for the next generation isn't in clear view, they've enjoyed raising their daughters Anne and Kate to work beside them in ranching activities and hope they will stay connected to their agricultural roots through the ranch or branded beef business.

"Many life lessons happen while taking care of animals and having them depend on you. Watching animals be born and watching them die – that's life," Betsy relates. "When you learn it in a ranch situation, it helps you become better prepared for life."

With time to consider other opportunities for their operation, Roger and Betsy are excited about the study of their soils, plant energy and stockmanship practices.

"When we put cows in bigger pastures, we don't just open the gate and let them run everywhere," Roger says

they've learned. "We get in front of them and stop them, and get them settled down. It makes a big difference on how calm the cattle are to be around and how easy they are to handle. We use dogs, 4-wheelers, horses and on foot."

A good partnership with their local veterinarian has contributed to their successful management. The cow herd is bovine viral diarrhea (BVD)-free. They don't skimp on minerals and continue to fine-tune the herd health program.

"The overall scheme gives you a little more flexibility in management," Roger says. "Our system is designed to produce cattle that will work for bigger operations with many cattle. They need the whole group to work together because they've got other things to do." **WR**