

Elk ranch dream continues to evolve

Calvin and Gail Ansley transition their operation to agritourism

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

RITCHFIELD, Idaho — Calvin and Gail Ansley’s dream when they married was to have a farm. They saved for 25 years to purchase their first farm in Hazelton, Idaho, in 2002. Even then, they soon realized it would take an off-farm job to support it. “Cal worked construction, and I built the business,” Gail said. Considering the low price of farm commodities at the time, they started to look at non-traditional farming opportunities. With elk velvet selling for \$125 a pound, plus the fact that they were already looking into raising elk, they made the plunge. But by the time they finally entered the business the value of elk velvet had decreased, and



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Calvin and Gail Ansley, owners of CA Bull Elk Ranch near Richfield, Idaho, and their granddaughter, Miah Ansley, 9, look out over the elk ranch and upland game bird hunting preserve the Ansleys have transformed into an agritourism operation on Thursday, July 17.

they were lucky to get \$5 to \$10 a pound, Gail said. They switched gears and focused on hunting, breeding and raising meat animals. They started with 20 bred elk cows and one bull and grew the herd to more than 425 head. Unfortunately, the couple was facing challenging times. The price of hay jumped from about \$70 a ton to \$180; regulatory, transportation and USDA slaughter fees increased; and the elk market remained depressed. The Ansleys had been harvesting about 45 head a year, but the high hay prices made the operation unsustainable. In 2011, the couple sold off all the

bulls — 105, including many trophy bulls — keeping a three-year option on five of them, Gail said. She said she wasn’t sure what the next chapter in the evolving operation would be, but she was determined to keep moving forward. A couple of years earlier, Gail had an epiphany. It came while hosting their son’s wedding at the farm. The wedding was held on the front lawn, surrounded by elk, and several guests commented on how great it was to sit and watch and listen to the elk, she said. “I thought, ‘I’m pushing the wrong thing. I should be selling the experience,’” Gail said. The idea that people could stay at the farm and enjoy listening to elk bugle and watch cows calving came full circle

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Calvin and Gail Ansley

Occupation: Owners, CA Bull Elk Ranch

Location: Richfield, Idaho

Business: Agritourism; all natural elk, pheasant and lamb meat; antler art; upland game bird hunting; chickens and eggs; goat milk and cheese

Acreage: 800 acres

Amenities: Guest lodge

Family: Three children, two grandchildren

Website: <http://www.cabullelkranch.com>



and the Ansleys set their sights on agritourism. To do that they needed more land than their 160 acres, and the land surrounding their Hazelton farm was locked up. They began looking for more acreage and found it near Richfield — 800 acres and an old farmhouse. They moved their operation a year ago, and in many ways they are just starting in business again, Gail said. They’ve turned the home into a guest lodge for “farm stays.” The lodge offers four nicely appointed guest rooms with private baths, a large game room, broad views from the large den and deck, and three meals a day of locally sourced food. The ranch also offers stocked upland game bird hunting. The elk are currently in corals near the lodge but are destined for open pasture in front of the lodge when the Ansleys get fence constructed. Visitors can also enjoy a farm setting of alfalfa fields, pastured lambs,

pens of milk goats, caged pheasants and free-range chickens, geese and guineas. The Ansleys use the meat, milk, eggs and cheese for guest meals and also sell to high-end restaurants in the Wood River Valley. They buy produce from local growers and farmers’ markets and plan to add greenhouses and aquaponics to raise some of their own. Gail’s goal is to help people understand where their food comes from and the rural, farming life through first-hand experience. There is still a lot of work to be done, but it’s an evolution, Gail said. “Do I know it’s going to work? No. But you have to have an idea what people want. And everybody who comes here loves the place, the rural setting,” she said. Some have even said the farm stay was life-changing and they would never again go the traditional travel route, she said. “That is my hope and dream,” she said.

Potato company stays ahead of trends

Steve Theobald: Traceability, sustainability among buyers’ main concerns

By JOHN O’CONNELL
Capital Press

AMERICAN FALLS, Idaho — R&G Potato Co. plans to overhaul its 20-year-old warehouse and is changing the way it operates, based on increasing attention among buyers to food safety, produce traceability and sustainable agriculture. Steve Theobald, CEO of the chip potato supplier, believes the proactive approach positions his company to address potential government mandates aimed at protecting consumers. R&G contracts for 5,000 chip potato acres from 12 Idaho growers and a few growers in Arizona and New Mexico. Founded in 1977, the company bills itself as the West’s largest repud supplier for the niche potato chip industry, selling to Frito-Lay, regional chipping companies and In-N-Out Burger for fresh-cut fries. Spuds bound for the burger chain bear a special label with enough data to trace a box back to an individual farm field. The label complies with the Produce Traceability Initiative — the industry’s voluntary effort to trace the origin of produce in case of a recall. In the interest of complying with food safety audits, Theobald had a written food safety plan drafted about a year ago, and his staff began “documenting everything.” “I think 90 percent of what we have been doing has been correct, but we haven’t been documenting it,” Theobald said. R&G also plans to make



John O’Connell/Capital Press

Steve Theobald, CEO of R&G Potato Co. in American Falls, Idaho, stands by potatoes bound for In-N-Out Burger. Theobald said his company is upgrading its warehouse, tracking grower inputs and implementing improved product traceability labels to comply with increasing customer expectations.

several warehouse upgrades, starting this summer by replacing old insulation with a more rigid product. To eliminate the potential for hydraulic oil to mix with food, he’s begun replacing motors with models without exposed chains and gears and installing drip pans in the interim. Within the next two years, he plans to install new potato washing technology, and he’s contemplating the purchase of three optical scanners that would better remove foreign matter and off-grade potatoes. Within the past three years, R&G has also begun tracking growers’ farm inputs, water usage and carbon footprints to comply with a major customer’s sustainable farming program. Theobald agrees with good stewardship, but he’s concerned sustainability programs may begin demanding that growers make unrealistic reductions to their inputs. “They’re watching water like a hawk,” Theobald said. “Sustainability for us, quite



Western Innovator

Steve Theobald

Occupation: CEO of R&G Potato Co., American Falls, Idaho

Family: Wife, Judy; daughters Stacey and Corinne

Education: Bachelor’s degree in business, Idaho State University

Hometown: Pocatello, Idaho

frankly, is a lot of reporting, a lot of paperwork and a lot of extra time.” United Fresh Produce Association spokesman Ray Gilmer believes there’s more “audit fatigue” within the produce industry than ever as buyers ask producers and food handlers to comply with an array of different audit standards. He said the industry has been encouraging use of a harmonized standard designed to cover most audit requirements. Ed Treacy, vice president of supply chain efficiencies with Produce Marketing Association, advises food suppliers to educate buyers who demand specific audits how the harmonized standard, or another audit they may be using, addresses common goals. He emphasized anything an audit doesn’t cover can be reviewed separately. Regarding traceability, Dan Vache, vice president of supply chain management with United Fresh, estimates 40-60 percent of produce cases now bear PTI-compliant labels. He said the industry has been waiting for restaurants and retailers who receive produce to update systems to make use of the new information.

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