

People & Places

Ranchers combine old and new

Jim and Mary Rickert use time-tested methods, latest technology

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

ANDERSON, Calif. — In their award-winning organic beef operation, Jim and Mary Rickert combine the best of the old with the best of the new.

Jim Rickert, whose family has been farming in the United States since the Revolutionary War, uses time-tested methods for minimizing stress in his animals and finishing them to produce top-quality meat.

At the same time, computer-based, detailed records are kept on each animal throughout its lifespan and he uses the latest in DNA technology in the breeding program.

"A lot of this is generational," Jim Rickert said of the care that goes into the cow-calf operation, which he and his wife have run for 37 years. "When your family's been in the business for at least 100 years, and when you're standing around cutting up meat on a table, you have plenty of time" to discuss ways to refine techniques, he said.

For their attention to food quality — they use no growth-stimulating hormones, feed antibiotics or animal-sourced proteins — and for their environmental stewardship, the Rickerts have won many awards over the years.

Among them was the 2015 Leopold Conservation Award from the California Farm Bureau Federation and two other organizations, which recognized Prather Ranch for collaborating with diverse partners to enhance the land on the operation's several owned and leased properties in Shasta and Siskiyou counties.

Among the projects the Leopold Award recognized was the Rickerts' approach to managing the wild rice fields on their land near Mt.



Tim Hearnden/Capital Press

Jim and Mary Rickert stand on the deck of their ranch near Anderson, Calif. The couple has won numerous awards for their organic beef and other agricultural products.

Shasta. After the harvest, they began tilling the stubble into the soil and keeping their fields covered in water year-round to benefit waterfowl and attract shore birds.

On April 7, the Rickerts were to accept the 2016 Distinguished California Agriculturalist Award at a Visalia, Calif., event hosted by the California Chapter of the American Society of Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers, a group that Jim Rickert led in the 1980s.

The group credits the Rickerts for increasing the Prather Ranch operation over time from a 3,000-acre pasture, hay and timber ranch to over 35,000 acres consisting of a vertically integrated cow-calf beef operation, feed yard, slaughterhouse, retail meat outlets and haying operation, all while preserving wetlands and wildlife habitat on their properties.

"This one was out of the blue," Mary Rickert said. "This one means a lot to us because it's our peer group."

The Rickerts both come from history-making families. Jim's ancestor, Heinrich Rickert, was a German mercenary soldier fighting for the British in the American

Revolution until he was captured by George Washington, who offered him land if he switched sides. The family has farmed in America ever since, gradually moving West and settling in Northern California.

A Hanford, Calif., native, Mary's grandfather, Julian McPhee, was a longtime president of California Polytechnic University-San Luis Obispo, once saving it from closure, and opened Cal Poly-Pomona. Her father, Emilio LaSalle, was a key early proponent of ag education in California.

The Rickerts' main business was appraising farmland. But in the late 1970s, Walter Ralphs — an executive in his family's Los Angeles-based Ralphs grocery store chain — asked the couple to help manage his original Prather Ranch in Siskiyou County. They began to acquire an interest in the incorporated ranch over time, gaining majority ownership when Ralphs died in 2010.

Over the years, the Fall River Mills, Calif.-based company has gained a reputation for the impeccable quality of its meat. Much care goes into every facet of the operation, from how the

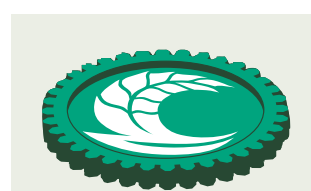
animals are treated to how they're slaughtered and how the meat is processed, Jim Rickert said.

The Rickerts have a closed herd, meaning they don't buy in bulls or share grazing land or facilities with other ranches' cattle, although they do use artificial insemination to keep the herd going. A herdsman takes an "artisanal approach" in watching each cow or calf closely for signs of illness, Mary Rickert said.

The cattle are raised on grass and finished on a mixture of barley, rice bran and hay, Rickert said. At slaughter, the environment is kept quiet and gentle so no stress hormones affect the quality of the meat, Jim Rickert said. The meat is dry-aged for two weeks and cut mostly with knives rather than saws to avoid having bone dust sour the meat, he said.

With making hamburger, "there's a real art to it," he said. "You have to have the right fat content. The fat has to come from the right part of the body. ... The fat on the back of the loins is the best."

The meat is refrigerated to just above freezing so that cuts are clean and bac-



Western Innovator

Jim and Mary Rickert

Residence: McArthur, Calif.

Ages: 67 and 63

Occupation: Majority owners and general managers, Prather Ranch in Northern California

Family: Children Jon Rickert, Eileen Rickert-Ehn and James Rickert

Website: <http://www.prather-ranch.com>

teria doesn't spread, he said.

The Rickerts have maintained a natural approach to production from the beginning, encouraged by the Ralphs stores, but they didn't always find a big market for organically produced beef.

"People like to buy local, and they like to connect with producers," Jim Rickert said. "But we went to farmers' markets when we were starting, and we'd go to San Rafael (in the San Francisco Bay area) and stand in the rain all morning and sell \$100 worth of meat."

But their prospects changed on Dec. 23, 2003, when bovine spongiform encephalopathy — called mad cow disease — was discovered in the United States.

"We've had a waiting list ever since," Mary Rickert said.

To calve twice a year, slaughter once a week and maintain a consistent level of quality is "a challenge," Jim Rickert said. But after nearly four decades in the business, the couple is still getting better at it, they said.

"If we could have another two or three careers," Jim Rickert said, "we'd probably get it dialed in."

Oregon commodity commissions seek members

The Oregon Department of Agriculture is looking to fill 74 openings on its 23 agricultural and commercial fishery commodity commissions.

That includes seven commissions looking for public members, according to an ODA press release.

Public members cannot be directly associated with

the production or handling of the commodity a commission addresses.

ODA Director Katy Coba appoints commissioners and is expected to begin making appointments as early as next month.

Successful public member candidates will join producers and handlers — those who are first purchas-

er of the commodity — to make up each of the commissions.

Commission activities are funded through self-assessments.

While those activities and accomplishments vary from commission to commission, each have the same general mission — to fund projects for research,

promotion or education.

Commission members meet four to seven times a year. It's a volunteer position with reimbursement for travel and meals associated with meetings.

Sometimes, public members have an opportunity to travel as part of a trade mission involving the commodity.

For information on all commodity commission openings, including public member openings, go to <http://www.oregon.gov/ODA/programs/MarketAccess/Pages/OregonCommodityCommissions.aspx> or contact Commodity Commission Program Manager Kris Anderson at 503-872-6600.

Calendar

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20 Northwest Locations

To submit an event go to the Community Events calendar on the home page of our website at www.capitalpress.com and click on "Submit an Event." Calendar items can also be mailed to Capital Press, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem, OR 97301.

Saturday, April 9

96th Annual California Ram Sale. Viewing starts at 8 a.m. Over 400 range rams from California, Oregon, Idaho and Utah. Crossbred, Hampshire, Suffolk and White-Faced (Columbia, Rambouillet) rams will be auctioned off in the sale. In addition three purebred ewes will also be sold. Also, ultrasound carcass measurements and a range ram index will be provided on all sale rams, Porterville Fairgrounds, 2700 W. Teapot Dome Ave., Porterville, Calif. <http://cawoolgrowers.org/sale/ramsale.html>

Idaho FFA State Leadership Conference, College of Southern Idaho, Twin Falls. idahoffa.org/

Tuesday, April 12

Oregon Cranberry Growers Twilight Meeting, 4 p.m., Robinson Farm, Bandon, Ore. www.oregoncranberrygrowers.com

Wednesday, April 13

International Fair of Agricultural Technologies Conference and Exhibi-

tion, FEXPO Agricola Central, Talca, Chile

Thursday, April 14

International Fair of Agricultural Technologies Conference and Exhibition, FEXPO Agricola Central, Talca, Chile

Friday, April 15

International Fair of Agricultural Technologies Conference and Exhibition, FEXPO Agricola Central, Talca, Chile

Saturday, April 16

Oregon Women for Agriculture Auction & Dinner, 5-9 p.m. The organization's 29th annual fundraiser, themed "Oregon Agriculture A to Z," will take place at the Linn County Fair & Expo Center, 3700 Knox Butte Road E in Albany, Ore. Cost: \$40 per person. <http://owaonline.org/owa-auction-2016/>

Goat healthcare and nutrition and packgoat seminar, 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Edelweiss Acres, Olympia, Wash. \$25 per person; \$7.50 for 4-H members. Go to the website, <http://edelweissacresobers.com/>, or call 360-742-8310.

Holistic Land Planning, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Create the ideal land plan for your ranch. What is the ideal layout of your fences? Where should infrastructure be located to facilitate animal handling and movement? Kittitas

Valley Event Center, 901 E. Seventh Ave., Ellensburg, Wash. Cost: \$227 until April 2. www.rootsofresilience.org

International Fair of Agricultural Technologies Conference and Exhibition, FEXPO Agricola Central, Talca, Chile

Hood River Hard-Pressed Cider Fest, noon-7 p.m., 3315 Stadelman Drive, Hood River, Ore. <http://hoodriver.org/cider-fest/>

Sunday, April 17

Holistic Land Planning, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. This is the continuation of a workshop that began Saturday. Create the ideal land plan for your ranch. Kittitas Valley Event Center, 901 E. Seventh Ave., Ellensburg, Wash. Cost: \$227 until April 2. www.rootsofresilience.org

Tuesday, April 19

Idaho Range Livestock Symposium, 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. American Legion Hall, Marsing, 208-896-4104. A one-day traveling program and networking event packed with information on industry relevant topics, for producers and rangeland managers.

Thursday, April 21

Idaho Range Livestock Symposium, 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Challis Community Events Center, Challis, (208) 879-2344. A one-day traveling program and networking event packed with information on industry relevant

topics, for producers and rangeland managers.

Saturday, April 23

Oregon Ag Fest, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. We strive to bridge the gap between urban and rural life, and to share the wonder and abundance of Oregon's bountiful and diverse harvest. Most importantly, we do this in a family-friendly way, where kids 12 and under receive free admission, and virtually all activities are free of charge. Oregon State Fairgrounds, Salem. <http://oragfest.com/>

California FFA State Convention, Selland Arena, Fresno. www.calaged.org/stateconvention

Soil Test Interpretation for Commercial Growers, 4-6 p.m. OSU Southern Oregon Research & Extension Center-Library. Soil scientist Elizabeth Murphy will present strategies and practical approaches to integrate knowledge about the chemical, physical, and ecological properties of the soil to refine nutrient management, improve soil health, and maximize production. \$20 fee. Pre-class questions and soil test report submittal are encouraged. 541-776-7371, ext. 208, <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/sorec/small-farms-2016-classes>

Sunday, April 24

Oregon Ag Fest, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

We strive to bridge the gap between urban and rural life, and to share the wonder and abundance of Oregon's bountiful and diverse harvest. Most importantly, we do this in a family-friendly way, where kids 12 and under receive free admission, and virtually all activities are free of charge. Oregon State Fairgrounds, Salem. <http://oragfest.com/>

California FFA State Convention, Selland Arena, Fresno. www.calaged.org/stateconvention

Monday, April 25

California FFA State Convention, Selland Arena, Fresno. www.calaged.org/stateconvention

Tuesday, April 26

California FFA State Convention, Selland Arena, Fresno. www.calaged.org/stateconvention

Thursday, May 5

2016 Animal Agriculture Alliance Stakeholders Summit, 7 a.m.-6 p.m. Westin Arlington Gateway, Arlington, Va. www.animalagalliance.org/summit

Friday, May 6

2016 Animal Agriculture Alliance Stakeholders Summit, 7 a.m.-noon. Westin Arlington Gateway, Arlington, Va. www.animalagalliance.org/summit

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