

# Holistic management helps high desert ranch

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**  
For the Capital Press

Eastern Oregon is a challenging environment — some years have more winter than summer.

Jack and Teresa Southworth raise cattle on the high desert on a ranch homesteaded in 1885 by Jack's great-grandfather. He grew hay for the oxen used at his sawmill, then decided to raise cattle.

"He wondered if he could make a living here, because no one ever had," Jack said.

"My father was a World War II veteran, and came back to the ranch with a scientific background. He thought that with enough machinery, equipment, research and new technology, we could solve all the problems. This was the thinking of that day, and it worked for him because energy was relatively cheap, land was relatively cheap, and he used new technologies to gradually improve the ranch," Southworth said.

"In 1978, when Teresa and I took over the ranch, we bought additional ground and then we were a million dollars in debt, with 15 percent interest rates," he said. "It was killing us but we didn't know what to do."

In 1984 Jack and Teresa went to Albuquerque, N.M., and took a week-long class from Allan Savory, the originator of holistic livestock management.

"That was our first exposure to holistic management. We learned more about how to manage grass and finances," he said.

The economic analysis helped them reduce their debt and increase their cow herd.

"We made a three-part holistic goal and realized we should measure success by how well we achieved our quality of life goal, our production goal and our landscape goal. Profit is an im-



Courtesy of Southworth Ranch

Jack Southworth with some of his cattle. He follows holistic livestock management techniques.

portant part of our goal, but it isn't the only thing."

The cattle are Angus and Tarentais, with some Simmental in the mix. A computerized cattle record-keeping system enables them to use the best cows in their AI program and grow their own bulls with the genetics they want, and acclimated to their own conditions and harsh environment.

"We want moderate-framed animals, moderate milk and fertile. We want below-average birthweight and above-average yearling weight," Southworth ex-

plained.

"We are part of the Country Natural Beef Co-op, where we are rewarded for raising cattle that fit our environment as well as satisfying the consumer. Our cows average 1,250 pounds and we expect them to have a calf every year without assistance," he said.

"We have long winters and

don't turn out until early May, and graze until Thanksgiving. We're feeding hay for about five months. In May we turn out on crested wheatgrass, which is ready for grazing earlier than the native grasses."

The cattle are rotated through multiple pastures.

"If we move cattle every

## Southworth Ranch

**Owners:** Jack and Teresa Southworth

**Location:** Seneca, Ore.

**Since:** 1885

three to five days this helps the grass recover. Our short growing season — about three months — means nine months the grass plant isn't growing," he said. "If we graze a plant hard on the 15th of July, near the last of the growing season, it needs almost a full year to recover and be ready to graze again."

By the heat of summer, cool season grasses are done growing.

Much of the grass is covered by snow after November and remains snow-covered until late February.

"Since we are at about

4,600 feet in elevation, we are one of the coldest places in Oregon," he said. "We've had a record low temperature of 54 below zero."

To reduce hay costs, they use rake-bunched hay in the fall and early winter.

"The piles of hay keep better, retaining more nutrients than hay in windrows — and is easier for cows to find and eat in the snow," Southworth said.

This provides feed through fall and into winter, then the cattle are fed big round bales.

"We put up most of our hay and buy a little alfalfa hay as a protein supplement," he said.

Ranching in Eastern Oregon is dependent on public land grazing, he said. Cattle need to be somewhere else on summer pasture so hay can be grown for winter feed.

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