

Ranch owners start from scratch

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

AIRLIE, Ore. — Karin Stutzman, in her second year as a cattle ranch owner with her husband, Terry, considers herself lucky.

If the Stutzmans hadn't heard about the land the first day it was listed, Karin said, they might still be looking.

"It was prime property," she said, looking down the Luckiamute River valley from her hillside perch on the Western Skies Cattle Ranch.

But, prime for what?

When they began looking for land, the Stutzmans simply wanted ground to farm. Both are in their 40s with agricul-

tural connections: Karin is the manager of the Polk Soil and Water Conservation District; Terry is farm manager for the McKee River Ranch, a grass seed and hay operation with acreage in Polk and Yamhill counties. They were anxious to own a farm or ranch.

Once they had the land in hand, Karin said she began researching the best farming use of this dry and hilly, oak-covered property. With SWCD resources available to anyone, she discovered the soil types, slopes, rainfall and history of her property. The hills were too steep for cropping. The soils, Jory and Bellpine in places, had them considering wine grapes.

But most of the soil was Dayton and Suver types, poorly drained loam-silt soils common to the valley hill-sides.

Here, oak trees, with fir, poison oak, blackberries and hawthorn, mocked cultivation. The couple reviewed the land's history — it had been a hillside dairy farm in the 1940s, with crops grown on the bottom acreage.

But about 20 years ago, the farm began to fall into ruin. By 2015, when the Stutzmans bought the land, its fences, barn, and culverts needed serious repairs.

Even so, the upland could handle a small herd of beef cattle, the Stutzmans decided, naming their ranch Western Skies, for the panoramic view. They fenced off 73 acres of range, and rented out the lower 40 acres to an annual crop farmer.

Today 19 cattle range in a portion of the 113 acres of oak- and fir-covered hillside above the Luckiamute River in Polk County, Ore. They rotate the Hereford and Angus cross cattle through four sections of the range, moving them to a new section every six weeks, April through November.

The cattle's rangeland diet does more than produce high-quality beef. The browsing also helps reproduce the



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Karin Stutzman and her dog, Lucky, at Western Skies Cattle Ranch, check their Hereford and Angus cross herd. Karin and her husband, Terry, are using cattle to help restore the native oak savannah.

native oak savannah, which was for thousands of years burned by Native Americans who used fire as a tool for

hunting, plant cultivation and gathering.

The couple is hoping to restore some aspects of a savannah, with help from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Partners Program and other conservation partnerships. They worked out a plan for spraying, clearing, planting, maintaining and grazing that was beneficial to cattle as well as to Oregon's native white oak and the wildlife that thrive in it.

"We thought the only way to clean up the place is with help, like these programs offer," Karin said. Some of the help comes from her four-legged foragers. "The cows are good grazers. They keep

down the fuels, the grasses, mainly."

With little cattle experience, Karin said they've learned a lot in the past two years. Some things, the hard way.

"Shots within three days of birth, or you're in a heap of trouble," she said, recalling the bruises from kicks delivered by older and healthy calves. "Get them while they're still wobbly and weak!"

Are there other crops in the future? Maybe, Karin said. But for now, they will continue building their herd to sell five or six cows direct to consumers while protecting the land.



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