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Rancher profile: East Foundation – Stewarding a bright future for Texas ranchers



East Foundation's San Antonio Vijeo Ranch entrance.

LARRY TRULOVE

By Noah Willoughby for Uvalco Supply
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Private lands and their stewardship are critical to maintaining Texas' diverse rangelands that provide food, fiber, and many other important resources for Texans, as well as a home to a unique array of wildlife – especially since over 93% of the state is privately owned. Within the State's private lands, there are more than 248,800 farms and ranches covering approximately 130.3 million acres. Given the huge socioeconomic impact of those farms and ranches, there is a growing need for private lands advocacy and leadership in the State's silently booming agriculture industry.

The East Foundation, a working cattle operation spread across South Texas and the nation's first designated Agricultural Research Organization (ARO) as of 2022, has stepped up to become a leading voice by promoting land stewardship and advocating for the future of ranchers, other private landowners, and the working rangelands they manage. This designation has helped the organization make a more significant impact through its ranching, science, and education

programs. The ARO designation was initially established in 2015 to lighten the regulations on agriculture-oriented non-profits, allowing them to produce and promote continuous and active research for the benefit of ranchers, farmers, and the agriculture industry as a whole.

“When we’re talking about economic development or growth of a state, we typically talk about the oil and gas, automotive, construction, or technology industries. Ranching does not get mentioned as much,” Neal Wilkins, CEO of the East Foundation, explains. “Ranching should be part of that conversation. It is a large and foundational part of our economy... As part of a community that understands the many values of ranching and rangelands, we need to talk about ranching as part of our future.”

Upon Robert East’s passing in 2007, the Foundation was established and entrusted with the ownership and management of 217,000 acres in South Texas. Their South Texas acreage consists of six different ranches across three counties, where their team of ranchers, researchers, and educators collaborate to promote the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education.

The Foundation’s efforts to establish itself as a leading voice for the industry focus on developing and promoting land stewardship practices for improving ranch productivity while conserving wildlife and native rangelands for future generations.

“Focusing on ranching, science and education is our way of supporting land stewardship,” Wilkins says. “Our ranching efforts promote land stewardship, our education efforts help build future leaders and professionals, and our science efforts help support better decision making by landowners and managers. We accomplish this through a process of discovery, development, and documentation to gather science-based information that will help other landowners make more informed decisions about their own operations.”

The East Foundation's acreage is managed as a working cattle operation so they can stay connected with – and relevant to – today's ranch managers. Texas boasts 14% of the country's cattle population, making the state number one in beef production, which the Foundation wants to support and grow.

They primarily run a cow-calf and stocker operation that uses the land sustainably to promote better cattle performance and enhance wildlife and rangeland productivity. One key component of their ranching research is efficiently raising cattle in a tough and arid South Texas environment to help other similar operations produce high-quality protein and conserve rangelands during harsh conditions such as drought. One way they do this is by experimenting with management tools, including grazing.

“Some of the most interesting stuff that we look at are the long-term impacts of grazing,” Wilkins says. “How to manipulate grazing systems so that we end up with efficient production of quality cattle as well as more productive land and understand what the nuances are as far as long-term land stewardship and how that relates to how you graze livestock today.”

The Foundation also looks to become a leading voice in using prescribed fire as a tool to replenish rangeland systems after rangeland conditions have declined over time. They have found that a thoughtfully prescribed fire effort, over time, can double or triple overall rangeland productivity, help with plant diversity, and maintain suitable forage and nutrition for livestock.

“Fire is a tool that can be used for good but it's also a destructive element that scares people who don't understand the value and importance of fire,” Wilkins says. “It's not uncommon for county commissioners and courts to lay burn bans all the way across their counties. We are able to work with our public policymakers to demonstrate not only the safety of those prescribed fires but also show them findings from our research over a 10-year period that prescribed fires can increase land productivity, wildlife diversity, and soil carbon sequestration. All of these good things come from a properly utilized prescribed fire program.”



Cross bred heifers stir up some dust, as they follow Garrett Stribling through the pasture.

LARRY TRULOVE

Native rangelands cover over 700 million acres in the United States, and two-thirds of that acreage is privately owned, with more than 92 million acres in Texas alone. Rangelands are constantly threatened by drought, disease, invasive plants, and exotic animals, which led the East Foundation to establish a science and research program in their first years. Its purpose is to find out how to translate potential problems into solutions and opportunities.

During the 20th century, the Y.O. Ranch and other ranches in Texas introduced the State to the breeding and hunting of exotic hoofed animals. Ranchers realized how profitable the industry could be, and an industry developed over time. Today, there are more than one million exotic hoofed animals in the State. The East Foundation considers this reality and many other aspects of a modern ranching enterprise when deciding what to study for their science program.

Considering those high numbers and the current market for exotics, the Foundation has opened research to investigate the effects of exotic animals – specifically the interactions of nilgai, an exotic hoofed animal from Asia, on native animals like white-tailed deer as well as cattle. As one example, the

Foundation and their research partners discovered nilgai tend to have a diet similar to white-tailed deer during a drought, which would cause more competition for the deer, rather than cattle.

Since the country's overall rangeland health relies in large part on private land stewardship, so does the health and sustainability of wildlife populations, including endangered species that can place a burden on ranchers and other landowners. It is estimated that fewer than 80 ocelots live in the United States, with most of them living on private ranches in South Texas, with more than 40 of them photo documented as living on the Foundation's El Sauz Ranch. These native wild cats are federally endangered due to their loss of habitat across their historic range, in addition to other factors. East Foundation has proactively worked to address the impacts of endangered species on their lands to develop effective, workable strategies to minimize risks to landowners while also helping conserve these species.

With their research partners, East Foundation monitors their population size, survival and mortality rates, movements and activity, prey abundance, habitat use, and competition with other carnivores. The recovery process relies on the stewardship of private landowners, who own and manage most of the remaining large, undeveloped tracts of land suitable for the species. The Foundation has become a leader in producing research so that they and their partners can make ocelot recovery possible (More research projects can be found on eastfoundation.net/science/) on working ranchlands.

The East Foundation's efforts toward promoting land stewardship cannot be done by a few people. "Somebody somewhere is training the next Secretary of Agriculture, but they are not being trained as intentionally as they should be," Wilkins says. "Our goal is that we want to train future leaders – on purpose – whether they will remain in ranching, agriculture, wildlife ecology, or not. We want people from all walks of life to understand the many long-term values of rangelands on large, intact ranches."

East Foundation advocates for better land stewardship education in schools both in Texas and across the country. It prioritizes student visits to the Foundation's ranches so that they can experience land stewardship firsthand and see and understand its value. Their education program involves classrooms, hands-on activities, and partnerships with other organizations, such as the TCU Ranch Management program and The King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management, among many others.

"A primary goal of our education effort is developing future leaders," Wilkins says. "We've had more than 40 graduate students go through our programs. By training and producing future leaders with hands-on, ranch-focused experience, they then develop into better, more informed ranch managers and policy makers. We have past interns working at the capital and past interns in at least 12 states in leadership roles, all having more of an impact on the world of ranching than we could alone here in Texas."

What could rightly be known as a living laboratory for better land stewardship, the East Foundation's 217,000 acres have impacted the world of ranching in many ways in just over a decade. When asked what his favorite part of his journey with the Foundation has been, Wilkins said it is producing the country's next leaders. Thankfully, the future of ranching is brighter than ever, and the East Foundation is leading the way.

With the massive size of the ranching industry and the market for beef cattle production sitting at \$97.9 billion in 2024, the Foundation emphasizes the training of future leaders and professionals through its education and research programs to promote land stewardship and expose students of all ages to the importance of ranching so that they too can go out and make a change.

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