

# BUILDING A BETTER HERD

Is there  
such a  
thing as an  
**ideal** South  
Texas cow?

By Burt Rutherford



# East Foundation intends to find out.

**If there's an ideal cow that can tough it out in the South Texas brush yet raise a calf that meets the quality expectations of discriminating beef consumers, the East Foundation intends to develop it.**

**South Texas cattle producers have been working toward the first half of that conundrum—raising cattle that can survive the often-inhospitable South Texas environment—for several centuries. And for nearly all that time, that was enough.**

**But that was then. This is now and consumer taste for quality beef has ratcheted up. How can South Texas ranchers thread the genetic needle to produce cattle that do both?**





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Not an easy task, that. But the East Foundation ranches are a living laboratory where innovation and science, history and legacy come to confluence to help South Texas ranches and land managers, and the vast expanse of South Texas rangeland they steward, remain sustainable for generations to come.

## IN THE BEGINNING

When the East Foundation more than 10 years ago began managing the 217,000 acres of South Texas ranchland spread out over six different locations, “The management was not necessarily what we would think of as modern grazing management today,” says Neal Wilkins, East Foundation president and chief executive officer.

“A lot of it was huge pastures, continuous grazing, no synchronized breeding season or anything like that,” he recalls. “That’s in essence the condition we found these ranches in when we took over.”

That’s changed and continues to change as the East Foundation team, ranging from post hole diggers to Ph.Ds., turns the land into a living laboratory for sustainable land stewardship in South Texas.

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They’ll do that with a cattle herd poised to add to the body of knowledge that well-managed native South Texas rangeland and the cattle that roam it are essential to the economic and ecological makeup of a large chunk of the Lone Star State.

## INTENTIONAL SCIENCE

The Foundation’s mission is to promote the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education. “What we’re focused on is making sure that ranches and native rangelands are as much a part of our future as they have been in the past,” Wilkins says.

Wilkins and his team approach that mission very intentionally. “The primary laboratory for us is the ranchland,” says Jason Sawyer, chief science officer. “Then we work to integrate the science program with the ranching operation.”

With sound science as the driving force and the ranching operation as the springboard, the East Foundation considers, researches, and analyzes a dizzying number of variables including cattle production, range management, and wildlife ecology and habitat.

## THREADING A NEEDLE

Given that the land and cattle are a living, at-scale laboratory, the first order of business was to improve the ranch infrastructure. “I’ve seen a 100 percent change,” says Tio Kleberg, one of a six-member professional advisory board of experts in different areas of ranch, land, and wildlife stewardship. “When we initially came on the Foundation pastures were big, fences were almost non-existent, and cattle waterings were poor.”

Then there was reproduction, the foundation of profitability for any ranch.

The cattle previously weren’t gathered every year and when they were, some cows had two calves at side, a yearling and a baby. Others had none. That had to change.

“You think of South Texas and the cattle it takes to be efficient and successful at reproduction,” says Clay Mathis, professional advisor and Director of the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. “And you build a cow herd that can raise the absolute highest quality calf that you can.”

Once the infrastructure was in place, the focus changed to doing exactly that. “Right now, we’re at a tipping point,” says Garrett Stribling, ranch business manager. When the Foundation took over, the cattle were a genetic hodgepodge, with both *Bos taurus* or European and *Bos indicus* or Brahman-type genetics. However, they were well adapted to making a living in the South Texas brush.

“Something we’re really interested in is how much *Bos indicus* do you really need in a cow herd in South Texas for those females to be able to stay in the herd for a long time but also produce a calf every year and weather the elements and the other variables that are out there?”

So, with a focus on threading the genetic needle between developing cows that can make a living in a tough environment

yet produce a beef product acceptable to today’s quality-conscious consumers, Foundation staff began a crossbreeding program with purebred Red Angus bulls.

“We’re taking those F1 Red Angus calves and developing them into replacement females,” Stribling says. The F1 heifers already on the ground are returning to the breeding herd and are bred to American Red bulls, which are 75 percent Santa Gertrudis and 25 percent Red Angus.

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Emily McCartney



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Knox Kronenberg



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As genetics stabilize, they’ll test their progress by keeping a database of individual records. While DNA and genomic testing are a possibility, those technologies are not feasible at present with the size and scale of the operation, Stribling says. Beginning with a highly variable genetic base may seem like an overwhelming challenge. Actually, it provides a good starting point, Sawyer says. “When you have lots of variability, that means you have cattle that have a range of traits and a range of (trait) combinations.” That provides lots of genetic cards to play as Sawyer, Stribling, and the rest of the staff shuffle the deck of desirable traits.

At present, they’re aiming to stabilize the genetic mix at roughly 75 percent *Bos taurus* and 25 percent *Bos indicus*. Sawyer admits they’ll never land squarely on that combination but will bounce on both sides, “but this gives us a platform from which we

can determine the optimal level of *Bos indicus* for this environment.” As more data on the cow herd accumulates, identifying the cattle with the traits they’re looking for will guide selection and culling decisions.

## MARKET DEMAND

While the Foundation’s ranches are a living laboratory for ranching and land and wildlife stewardship at scale, the cattle are part of the economic backbone of the Foundation. As such, the herds must be managed to make a return on investment.

The ranching operation is a cow-calf outfit; its place in the industry structure is to produce the calves that, after weaning, will go to a feed yard. But how will they know if their genetics are truly threading the needle?

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That’s done by adopting a production and marketing system to optimize the value of the cattle. “Typically, we’ll wean our calves, then bring them for a short preconditioning period,” Stribling says. That allows for another round of vaccinations, so the calves stay healthy.

“Then we’ll turn them out on grass and stocker them for 90 to 120 days, depending on rainfall.” There, the calves gain weight cost-effectively. Then the calves will either be sold as feeders or retained through the feedyard.

Data is collected during the entire process and tied back to the cow herd. “We’re trying to sort the cows by like type and kind, especially the younger cattle where we know a portion of their genetics. We’re keeping those in contemporary groups and turning out specific bulls on specific sets so we can have a better estimation without actual genetic testing of what proportion, especially Red Angus and Santa Gertrudis, the cattle are,” Stribling says.

“The Foundation has a unique set of individuals and resources and a unique mindset when it comes not only to the ranch and operations, but the science and education aspects as well,” Stribling says. “We can always do better and we’re always working to discover better ways to accomplish our goals.” 

