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CWI skills help ranchers

Locals benefit from farm business management course

HOMEDALE — After a lifetime of family ranching, a local couple now manages their operation with more business savvy thanks to the help of a class designed to help people in agriculture make better financial decisions. It's a sign of how the valley's traditional agricultural roots can merge with its increasingly urban business environment.

Burgess Angus Ranch, which uses a brand registered in the family more than 100 years ago, has a new outlook on making sound financial decisions in an uncertain economy.

Rancher Doug Burgess of Burgess Angus Ranch speaks about a class at the College of Western Idaho that helped him learn to run the family ranch like a business.

Doug and Janice Burgess run the ranch about five miles south of Homedale. Janice, who married into the family operation, enrolled in a farm business management course offered through the newly created College of Western Idaho after the couple expanded their operation into Canyon County from Jordan Valley.

The Burgesses had been watching the ranching industry change for years.

"You used to make a living on 200 cows," Doug said. "Just like any other business you have to keep expanding to keep up with it. That's why we moved here, to expand it," Janice added.

She discovered that the course, taught locally in Nampa during the winter off-season over a period of three years, gives farmers and ranchers the kind of know-how they need to run a successful business, as opposed to simply operating as usual.

"The biggest change in this country in ranching is people are starting to treat it like a business, instead of this is what I've always done or because granddad did it ... It's a business," Doug said. "And you better treat it like a business or you'll be out of business. And that's part of the reason for taking the course," Janice explained. "Things have changed greatly since grandpa ran the ranch." Course attracts diversity

The class meets seven hours a day once a week. "We do a year's worth of time in 15 weeks, and we do three winters in a row," said program manager David Wells, who at the end of the program spends a day on the farm of each participant to see how the students have applied the lessons learned in class.



The class attracts students in their 80s as well as students of the average age — 39. “The common thread is, ‘I think I’m in trouble,’” Wells said.

To encourage the participation of families who run farms, the CWI course offers one price for a couple to attend. Wells said he’s never had a student in their 80s earn anything less than an A. Of the other students, “there are two kinds of young people — really serious and those that flunk,” he said. The ones that do poorly tend to be the ones forced to take the class, perhaps at the request of a lending institution that has agreed to a loan upon the completion of a farm management class.

The ones that flourish, he said, are the ones like Janice who come prepared with a clear set of goals.

Janice was motivated to become the farm’s manager as the ranch expanded. Better bookkeeping was the goal as the operation got more complicated. Janice also didn’t want to have to depend on a hired hand to manage the books.

Obstacles to overcome

The couple was faced with a house in need of repairs, corrals that were falling down and an irrigation system that needed to be switched to sprinklers to save water. The ranchers also wanted to improve their marketing to showcase their pride in verifying their calves are hormone-free, certifying they are locally born and raised, and checking the quality of their livestock.

Ranchers Doug and Janice Burgess of Burgess Angus Ranch check on their Angus bulls Saturday afternoon.

“She’s been a model ever since,” Wells said. The couple met their goals, refurbishing their home, installing a new water system, making repairs and spreading the word about their growing operation. “Every year since then, they’ve attempted to share what they’ve learned with the community. I’ve never had a farm make such a concerted effort. Every place I go, people talk about the Burgesses.”



Janice puts on a special dinner for customers and gives them seminars to educate them on cattle issues. She also includes information on the ranching industry in a newsletter she produces three to four times a year for customers and potential customers.

A few years after completing the course, the couple was able to put into practice the lessons they learned, such as deciding what financial decisions are worth the risk and which ones are just plain bad ideas. They feel good about making decisions like spending money up-front to ultrasound their cattle, which allows them to predict the quality of the steaks they will ultimately produce.

“You darn sure can make better choices,” Janice said of the CWI class. “It helps you make more informed, better decisions with your money.”

That’s a priceless lesson for those involved in a tough industry, said Wells, who has seen beef sell for a dollar a pound in the 1970s and then decrease in price to 84 cents a pound this year.

“Today the market is almost 15 cents less, more than 40 years later,” Wells said. “Every farmer, every rancher, is pitted against the world.”



Rancher Doug Burgess looks over his Angus herd Saturday afternoon at his ranch.



Doug and Janice Burgess talk about a College of Western Idaho class that helped them learn to run their ranch like a business.