

# LA CREEK DEPENDS ON BRAUNVIEH IN THEIR LOW INPUT OPERATION

BY JO DEXTER, MANAGING EDITOR

The Sandhills of Nebraska has been a productive cattle-ranching region for decades. Today, the area still supports several hundred thousand head of beef cattle. La Creek Inc., is a family-owned, commercial cattle ranching corporation operating multiple herds at multiple locales.

Brad Emerson, a third-generation cattleman, manages the Braunvieh-influenced operation on his grandfather's land south of Ellsworth, Neb.

Emerson was born and raised in the Sandhills. His family raised straight-bred Hereford cattle in the 1950s and '60s until dwarfism struck their herd. In an effort to introduce crossbreeding and more milk in their cattle, they tried "beef Swiss" bulls on their Hereford cows.

"That cross and the resulting herd of cows were, in retrospect, some of the best cattle our family has ever run," Emerson says. Over time, however, as the cows became higher bred beef Swiss, they lost their muscle and bone.

In the 1980s, the Emersons introduced Simmental cattle, followed by black Angus genetics. "We raised some big calves and got more substance back in our cows, but had to supplement the cows more than we liked for them to maintain on our ranch environment," Emerson explains.

## WHY BRAUNVIEH?

The Emersons continued their search for a breed that would perform in their rugged range conditions. In 1991, they purchased some three-quarter and seven-eighths Black Uno Braunvieh bulls from Kendall Schlake at Rock Creek Braunvieh. "We were extremely happy with the calves out of those bulls," Emerson says. "It was then that I realized Braunvieh were special and more of a multi-use beef breed than the beef Swiss we had used in the past."

Emerson contemplated becoming a Braunvieh seedstock producer. He purchased some registered cows and heifers from various breeders. "Our ranch environment is tough, and the females we purchased never adapted and performed as well as we'd hoped," Emerson says.

So, in 2001, they attended the National Western Stock Show and purchased a purebred Braunvieh bull, RCB Mr. Slate, from Schlake. "The 'Slate' bull has run with our cows since and always seems to maintain his condition. We've been very happy with his progeny, and the heifers we kept are working out great," Emerson says.

Emerson currently runs 165 head of spring-calving cows and 70 head of fall-calving cows on nearly 4,000 acres. He's incorporated new management philosophies along the way.

"I am a believer in low cost, low input production," Emerson says. By using Braunvieh genetics, he's reduced the herd's mature cow size and maintenance requirements.

"I'm a one-man show," he says, "and at La Creek, it's the survival of the

toughest." In fact, the fall-calving herd hasn't seen any hay or much added supplementation for nearly 10 years.

## SURVIVAL OF THE TOUGHEST

La Creek's calving interval is 37-45 days for both first-calf heifers and mature cows. Replacement heifers and first-calf heifers run with the cows. "It's been my observation that young cows learn how to be good mamas from the old cows, and those that are tough enough will perform and stay in the herd," Emerson says. "When I feed my spring-calving cows during calving season I often see the young cows off grazing while the old cows are following the feed outfit."

Spring calving falls between April 1 and May 7. Due to limited feed resources, La Creek will typically wean their calves early – by early October – so cows can get back in condition prior to winter. Steer calves are weaned on the truck and sold private treaty to a stocker/feeder. In the past, Emerson has gotten some data back on calves but not enough to draw conclusions. La Creek calves are not implanted and good herd health records are kept so calves can be marketed as "natural."

Although Emerson will be the first to admit he's not scientific in his management, he knows that most of La Creek cows are weaning calves 50-60 percent of their body weight. The average mature cow weight is 1,050 pounds. His goal, however, is 900-pound cows that wean 500-pound calves.

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— Brad Emerson



“The really small and the really big heifers seem to sift out of the herd because they typically come up open,” Emerson says. “Only the cattle that fit the environment and management conditions will wean a good calf and rebreed.” Despite their low input management style and tough ranch environment, on average, cows at La Creek Ranch are in the herd up to 10 years.

When asked why he likes Braunvieh cattle, Emerson responds, “The Braunvieh breed is getting more appealing for commercial cattlemen all the time. From the time they’re weaned, Braunvieh females look like cows – the type of cows I want to raise. They’re moderate in size, have adequate milk, muscle and bone and good dispositions.”

Most important, however, they seem to be working in the La Creek ranch environment.

### FUTURE PLANS

Right now, Emerson believes he’s close to developing a herd that can be profitable and sustain in both a tough ranch environment and a tough economic environment. Developing more options to market his calves is one area Emerson wants to focus on. Knowing that information can create added value, he has plans to ultrasound his heifers this year and see how they measure up. Additionally, Emerson is investigating the possibility of marketing calves to a grass-fed beef company.



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Starting this breeding season, La Creek will use some proven grass-fed, black Angus bulls on his cows.

“Right now my cowherd is three-eighths Braunvieh and higher. If I want to stay a commercial herd, which I do, and I want to keep getting a CAB black-hide premium from buyers, I have go back to black,” Emerson explains.

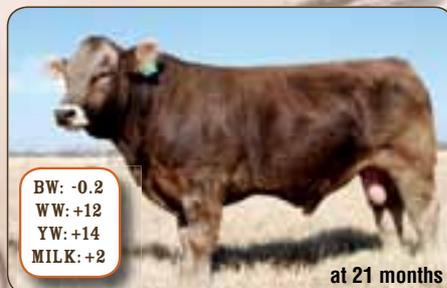
He will be the first to say he’s not abandoning the Braunvieh breed. In fact, the Emersons have been advocates of the breed since 1991. “We’ve bettered ourselves and our cowherd by using Braunvieh bulls,” he says. “I’ll never cuss the day we started using Braunvieh bulls, and we’ll continue using them in the future in a two-breed rotation.”

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