

CWFP Profile

Non-Confined Backgrounding Operation Featured on Tour

by Connie Pantle



O'Brien Cattle Company hosted a field day in mid-September to showcase their innovative livestock operation. Above, Jason Sutterby, and Klay and Kerry O'Brien listened as Kallie O'Brien explains some details about the family operation. Photo C. Pantle.

Hepler, KS—Kerry O'Brien is a man of few words. What he does on his cattle operation in Southeast Kansas speaks volumes however.

O'Brien, who operates a non-confined starting and backgrounding livestock operation just north of Hepler, was born and raised in the cattle business. He's applied that long-term knowledge to how O'Brien Cattle Company Inc. backgrounds cattle.

In addition to running a non-confined livestock operation, O'Brien practices low-stress handling of cattle. O'Brien said the non-confinement and low-stress handling go hand-in-hand

and make his operation more profitable. "I want to work and make a profit, all while conserving the land for future generations."

To highlight these practices and the operation, the O'Brien Cattle Company hosted a tour on September 18. The tour featured the working facilities and handling of the cattle, grassland management and riparian area protection, alternative water supply, and a tire tank installation demonstration. Organized largely by Herschel George, Kansas State University Watershed Specialist, and Dale Kirkham, KRC's Clean Water Farm Field Organizer, the

tour drew almost 150 people from all around eastern Kansas and beyond.

During the tour, Gary Kilgore, K-State professor emeritus of agronomy, explained the water quality benefits of grass traps versus confined operations. A grass trap is basically a small pasture with feeding facilities available where much of the feed is provided but the grass provides some forage as well as a clean place to rest out of the dust or mud, and the cattle spread the manure.

Kilgore said grass traps allow the cattle to "graze and deposit animal waste where grass can benefit from the nutrients." In addition, Kilgore said grass traps slow the water down and filter out E coli and other nutrients before the water reaches a stream.

"As landowners, we want to do the right thing," O'Brien said. "We're trying to do what we can do to make things safer downstream."

The calves are fed on grass traps of fescue which is interseeded with ladino and durana clovers. The fescue in the grass traps contains non-toxic endophytes, making both the fescue and the cattle more productive. The grass is divided into traps or smaller areas, which encourages the cattle to better utilize the grass. Because of the quality of the grass, O'Brien said he's actually able to "run more cattle days and have grass left".

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Herschel George, K-State Research and Extension watershed specialist, said, "In my opinion, down the line more producers are going to go to a non-confined operation." And the O'Brien Cattle Company "is an excellent example," he said.

Another speaker during the tour was Dale Kirkham, field organizer with the Kansas Rural Center's Clean Water Farms Project (CWFP). Kirkham explained the importance of wintering cattle away from creeks and protecting riparian areas along streams and creeks like the O'Briens did.

To protect water quality along Paint Creek, which is part of the Marmaton watershed and WRAPS (Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy) area, O'Brien fenced the riparian area to exclude the cattle from the creek. By protecting this area, O'Brien said "the streambanks have been healing themselves with time". O'Brien said that fencing the riparian area along the creek has not reduced his productivity. "I'm grazing just as many cattle as before," he said. To control weeds and brush, O'Brien allows the cattle to flash graze the area.

Prior to implementation of the non-confined operation, O'Brien worked with George to plan a water distribution system throughout the grass traps. George, in turn, contacted Kirkham and the CWF project to assist with funding for a pumping system, pipelines and livestock



Jason Sutterby and Kerry O'Brien explain how the "Bud Box" system for handling cattle reduces stress for everyone. "When working cattle," says O'Brien, "slowing things down, actually speeds things up." Photo C. Pantle.

waterers throughout the grass traps. A pipeline and water tanks were distributed throughout the individual pastures to provide the cattle drinking water away from the creek.

A new pond, which was built using State Conservation Commission funding through the Bourbon County Conservation District, provided the water for the watering system throughout the grass traps. Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams (KAWS) assisted with cost-share for the riparian fencing as well as fencing to protect the new pond.

In addition to improving water quality, O'Brien said the grass traps have improved the health of his cattle, which is especially important when dealing with high-risk cattle. Typically, the calves are weaned then shipped immediately to O'Brien Cattle Company at about 350 to 450 pounds, according to O'Brien's daughter Kallie. She

said the cattle are then held on the grass traps and "after 45 to 60 days, or until healthy, they will be shipped to rye, Flint Hills or local grass depending on the time of year and then on to a finishing yard".

O'Brien said as many as 35 to 40 percent of calves on a dry lot are "doctored" while the number drops to ten to 15 percent for calves on grass traps like his. He added that the results are not only in the numbers, but in the overall improved quality of the animal.

The way the cattle are maintained allows O'Brien to pass along a better product to the public. "Consumers want to know the cattle are treated the way they ought to be," he said. "I want to do things right."

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He said the practices that he uses are simple to implement and do not adversely affect his profit. The Bud Box, named after low-stress cattle handler, Bud Williams (www.stockmanship.com), was a highlight on the tour and an integral part of the cattle company's handling.

The Bud Box allows a small group of cattle to load onto a trailer or walk into the chute easier. The principal of the Bud Box works with the cattle's instinct to go back to where they came into the pen. A demonstration from O'Brien Cattle Company employees, Jason Sutterby and Steve Imhof, illustrated the ease of working cattle this way. "They practically load themselves," O'Brien said. When working cattle "slowing things down, actually speeds things up. And it actually increases the bottom line," O'Brien said.

O'Brien said he wanted to host the field day at his cattle company because he views people like George, Kilgore and Kirkham as invaluable resources. O'Brien said he received much more than funding through the CWFPP by working with Kirkham. "I can't say enough good things about Dale and his willingness to share his knowledge". O'Brien said he learned from attending field days and listening to Kirkham and George.

George said that the O'Briens and their employees "want to get it right." George said. "They care not only about the well-being of

the livestock, but they care about the well-being of the grass and the land," George said.

And that love of cattle and the land is something O'Brien hopes to pass down to his and wife Tammie's children, Kolt, Kallie and Klay. "I think I have some kids who might want to come back and help out with the operation after college," he said.

Sponsors of the tour included Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams (KAWS); Kansas State University Research and Extension; Bourbon County Conservation District; Marmaton WRAPS; Producers Cooperative Association of Girard. □

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During lunch at Red Rock Ranch, the group heard from Les Olsen on the benefits of a bale ring feeding pad constructed of fabric, rock and lime. Olsen, who installed a demonstration bale ring on his farm, said the feeding pad benefits the cattle, protects water quality and makes his job as a cattleman easier.

Carl Jarboe, Jackson County Buffer Coordinator added comments on a feed bunk pad installed as a demonstration in Jackson County as well as a cost comparison of a geo-textile pad versus a concrete pad. He said installation of a geo-textile pad averages \$1.10 per square foot, while installation of a concrete pad averages \$3.17 per square foot.

Will Boyer, K-State Extension watershed specialist, reinforced the issue by referencing how mud effects cattle performance. Boyer also provided a demonstration of an alternative watering site with a water pump powered a solar panel. Even on the cloudy day of the tour, Boyer said there was water being pumped by the system.

Corey Alderson, a wildlife biologist with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks also spoke on how management practices affect wildlife habitat. He said flash grazing for short periods of time is beneficial to wildlife due to the diversity it provides. Livestock help manage the plant vegetation—especially non-native species—while providing nutrients for native grasses. He also explained incentive programs like Conservation Reserve Program (CRP); a continuous CRP practice titled CP38E; the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). He said programs like these provide the landowner with incentives to implement practices that impact the soil, water quality and wildlife.

Also during lunch, Mike and Pat Wulf gave a virtual tour of their Pottawatomie County farm via a power point presentation. The Wulfs converted cropland to grass where their herd of cattle and goats graze. Howell said the Wulfs were selected for the tour due to the number of BMPs they've implemented on their farm.

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