At HOME On The RANGE
IRRIGATION, CATTLE AND WILDLIFE GO TOGETHER AT THE CHAPARROSA RANCH

"Home, home on the range, where the deer, quail, wild boar, javelina, turkey and cattle play..."

Those lyrics are obviously out of whack from the original song, but at the Chaparrosa Ranch in southwest Texas (halfway between Uvalde and Eagle Pass) they make perfect sense. That’s because the management team on the 80,000-acre (32,400 ha) operation has successfully utilized their irrigated pasture and grasslands to integrate cattle and commercial hunting operations.

“We’re just sitting in a unique area down here that has abundant wildlife, plus we have a hunting lodge on the property that is a very nice facility,” said Tommy Haegelin, general manager for Chaparrosa Ranch. “We decided to utilize our resources and generate additional income for the ranch.”

Irrigating cattle pasture

While commercial hunting at the ranch began only about a year ago, the decision to make the ranch a cattle operation came several years previously. Much of the land at Chaparrosa was at one time flood irrigated to raise corn, grain sorghum and cotton. But because of water issues and regulations, a decision was made to switch to cattle.

“We felt like, with the staff and layout we had on the ranch, we were more cattle-oriented. We felt cattle should be our core business and that’s why we dedicated our irrigated land to the cattle business,” Haegelin said.

Chaparrosa has a 1,000-head cow herd, and run 6,000 to 8,000 head of stocker cattle through their operation on an annual basis. Many of the cattle are pastured on 2,055 acres (832 ha) that are primarily irrigated with 13 center pivots, 11 of which are Zimmatics. Planted on the pastureland are coastal and jigs bermudagrass, ryegrass and oats.

“We wouldn’t have existed the last couple of years here in south Texas without irrigation,” Haegelin said. “About the only winter grazing available is what’s under irrigation. We’ve got two big risks in the stocker business: the markets and the weather. Irrigation helps take the weather risk out of it.”

According to Haegelin, they receive about 19 inches (48.3 cm) of rainfall a year and describes the environmental conditions as being frequent drought followed by floods.

All the pivot systems are fitted with drop hoses to assure high efficiency water application. A weather station was also recently installed at the ranch and will be connected by phone modem to Texas A&M University.

“One we are on-line, we will have the ability to be even more efficient with our water application,” Haegelin said. “By monitoring our relative humidity, temperature, wind speed and wind direction, we will be able to get recommendations from the University as to how much water we need to apply on a given day. This will help us optimize the growth of the specific crop we are producing.”

The Chaparrosa Ranch sits atop the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer supplying it with abundant underground water. Most of

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the irrigation wells are set from 250 to 450 feet (76 to 137 m) deep. The irrigation season runs year round with the pivots operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week at times.

All but one of the pumps is run with electric engines. Because of this
dependence on electricity, the ranch does have generators available to hook up to the irrigation systems in case of extended power outages.

**Cell feeding cattle**

A unique aspect of the cattle operation at the ranch is the cell grazing system that is used to pasture the cattle. Each pivot circle is cordoned off into eight sections or paddocks with electric fence. The cattle are put in one paddock at a time to graze and then rotated to another paddock every fourth day. The rotation process is made easy by locating the cattle watering system at the center of the pivot. The cattle become systematic in their watering habits, so the cowboys must simply be at the center of the pivot at the right time to open and shut gates.

“What the cell grazing system allows us to do is to stock at heavier rates because we’re not watering over the top of the cattle. We’re watering where they have already been,” Haegelin said. “Most of our pivots can put on one inch (2.5 cm) of water in about two days.”

So how do they avoid the pivot knocking down the electric paddock fences? “We use what is called a break-over post which is a spring loaded fiberglass post,” Haegelin explained. “When the tower hits the fence, the post just lays over and then springs back up once the tower passes by.” Haegelin is quick to point out that only one tower can pass over the fence at a time, therefore the fences had to be placed at 30-degree angles to the pivot system instead of parallel.

“The cattle remember the bad experience they had the first time they got caught in it.” Haegelin said when explaining why they have not had a problem with the cattle hopping over the lowered portion of the electric fence. Haegelin doesn’t have to worry about the fences going off due to an electrical outage.
because the fences are operated from power generated by solar panels.

The stocker cattle weigh around 500 to 525 pounds (227 to 238 kg) when they are first put out to pasture. The goal is to sell them at 750 pounds (340 kg). The stockers usually gain 1.7 to 2.2 pounds (.77 to .99 kg) per day, so their stay on the pasture runs about 110 to 125 days. Because of varying weight gains, cattle are sorted out as they hit the desired weight and shipped off to market.

In 1999, around 600 whitetails were harvested.

Chaparrosa maintains two full-time wildlife biologists on staff to manage the wildlife and to allow the ranch to get special management permits from the state of Texas. Bobwhite and blue quail are the next most popular game hunted at the ranch following whitetail deer. Many of the hunters opt for two- or three-day packages that give them time to hunt a mixed bag that can include turkey, wild boar and javelina (also known as peccary).

**Integrated operation**

Although the commercial hunting operation at Chaparrosa is relatively new, it is considered to be fully integrated with the cattle operation. Pastureland is carefully monitored so it is not overgrazed by the cattle. Even the cattle in the native country are rotated on a regular basis to maintain plenty of forage for the wildlife. And while the wildlife do graze some on irrigated pastures, they use the area more for refuge than feeding. The deer and quail will spend the majority of their lifetime in the native country.

The 12 full-time staff members at Chaparrosa Ranch have a thorough understanding of how the operation complements the other and work diligently to assure that a balance is maintained between the two. Practical and proven management practices are used at the ranch to assure a prosperous future.