



Texas Agriculture

March 6, 2009

Published by Texas Farm Bureau for commercial farmers and ranchers

Dry Times.
Hard Times.

Pages 7-13



Dry times. Hard times.

By Bobby Horecka
and Matt Felder

David Kraft's normally confident stride slows to a despairing trudge as he surveys the barren ground where his winter oats should be growing.

He planted them in early October 2008, and spent the next month sowing his wheat. That would carry his small cattle herd through the coldest winter months, he thought; maybe even produce a nice grain crop.

But nothing made.

David's crops and cattle are quickly becoming liabilities, as a 100-year drought digs deeper with no relief in sight.

"Weeds won't even grow it's so dry," he says. "Our fields have never been this bare."

The Kraft family has farmed this patch of ground since 1895. It's seen its share of good times and bad, and while David wasn't born during the last big drought—most point to the decade of the 1950s—he says the old timers all agree the current catastrophe is far worse.

"It was pretty bad, but not near as bad as this year," says Jackie Kraft, David's dad. "In the '50s, we at least had a little bit of grazing and a little bit of stuff to make hay."

But not this year.

Drought couldn't have come at a worse time for the 34-year-old New Braunfels area farmer. David left a job in town to take over the family farming operation in 2004.

It's been hard times for him almost ever since.

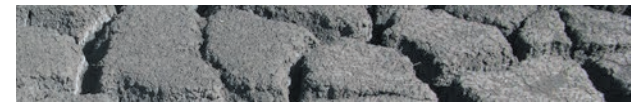
"We had some good years," David admits. "But this is the second drought now, and we've experienced a flood, too, since then."

It would seem enough to topple the strongest among us. Yet somehow, David's confidence remains high, if not somewhat subdued by the deplorable conditions around him.

"We can't change what Mother Nature does," he says. "You know, it's just another obstacle to overcome. I mean, you get frustrated, but this is just part of it."

"I think some of the younger farmers have a little bit better attitude than the older ones," he adds. "They seem to get a little more frustrated. But they've been through this a lot more times than we have. I guess it just depends on what you're made of."

When rancher Sam Burnam looks out across the subtle dips and rises of his land near Marble Falls, he can't help but feel a twinge of embarrassment.



The Drought of '09: One for the Record

“I can imagine what my great-grandfather and grandfather and dad, too, must think—looking down and looking at this ranch—the condition it’s in now...” says Sam, his gaze searching for some nondescript place beyond the oaks.

“But there’s absolutely nothing we can do,” he says. “We’ve gone 17 months with very little rain—just 10 inches of rain—the desert gets that much. We’re doing the best we can.”

Typically, the Burnam ranch is “as good a cattle country as you can find anywhere,” Sam says, a place that has been in his family for more than 150 years and raised countless generations of cattle, white-tailed deer and turkey.

He and his brother, Bobby, are the fifth generation of Burnams to oversee the place. They’re a rare breed in this part of the Hill Country, still ranching in an area that has become overrun by Austinites looking for a weekend paradise.

But paradise, for the Burnams, is parched.

The drought has sapped the grass from their pastures, the water from their tanks. The deer and turkey are vanishing with the greenery, and even Civil War Era live oaks are dying off.

Sam is tall, a powerful man. But at 65, the swagger of youth has long given way to years of hard work. Still, the Burnam brothers spend endless days lugging propane torches into the field, scorching the spines off prickly pear just so their cows can eat.

Buying hay is nearly out of the question, Sam says.

“If we were feeding just hay, we would have been gone a long time ago,” Sam says. “You take five or six rolls of hay a day at \$60 a roll, it doesn’t take long to eat up everything—cow, calf, you name it.”

So they burn pear, hoping each day’s cactus diet brings them one day closer to the rains.

Those days, however, may be numbered.

Sam and his brother have already talked culls—paring their foundation herd to its barest minimum—to wait it out and try again later when the rains finally come.

But as even the supplies of cactus grow slim, they realize the possibility that later may not come.

“We’re getting a little long of tooth to be starting over too many times,” he says. “We’re just suffering right now. This year—well, the last few years—it’s been pretty trying times.”

Just outside of Taylor, Steve Hubnik kicks up the rock hard soil in search of moisture. He’s not in a pasture or a row crop field.

He’s standing in a ranch pond that is nothing



*David Kraft,
New Braunfels*

more than a dusty crater.

The cracks—large enough to swallow a boot—spread like a spider web, a stark reminder of a drought that spans the state and targets its heart.

Although much of Texas is gripped in drought conditions, the very worst—in fact, the most severe conditions in all of the United States—rest on the state’s geographical center, spanning a region from Temple to Victoria, Huntsville to Kerrville.

“It’s devastating,” Steve says. “I lost 10 animals (head of cattle) in these ponds when they were nothing more than a mud hole. Now they are dry—bone dry.”

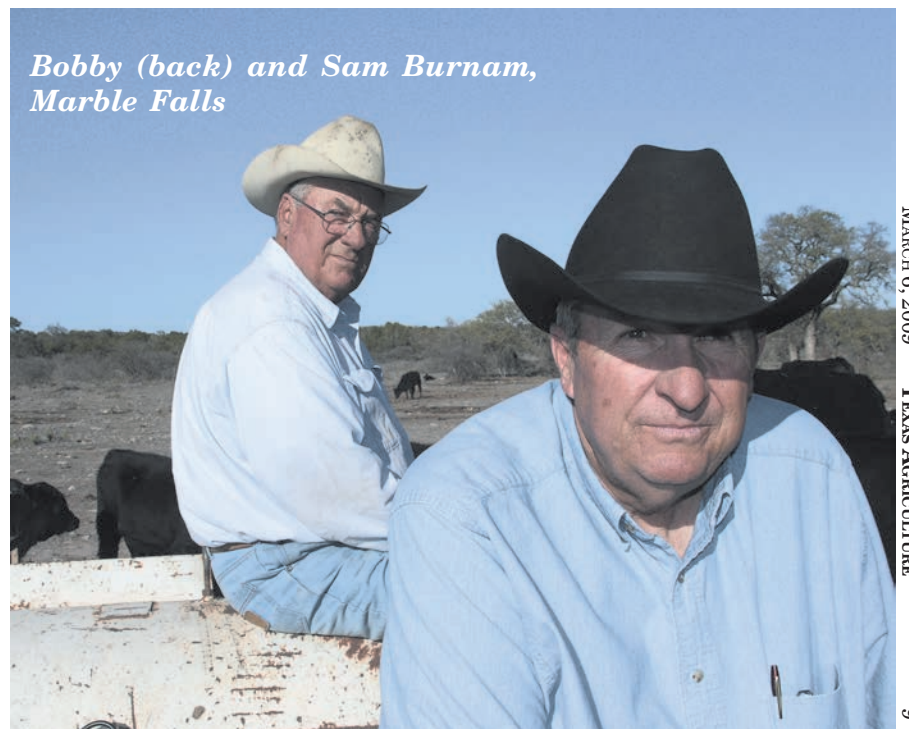
Beyond the cattle, Steve is filled with uncertainty about the hundreds of acres of farmland he’s tended since 1970.

A quick pass through his wheat field reveals an undeniable truth. Juvenile sprouts—planted back in November—are just now starting to emerge, thanks to recent weak, sporadic showers. The stand resembles more of a volunteer crop than

one that will turn a profit.

“At the moment, my wheat is a disaster,” Steve says. “I do not intend to plant corn, which we normally do. I think I will go with milo this year, with the intentions of being able to roll it up for hay if it doesn’t make a seed.”

Manor farmer and rancher Gerald Thurman has the same laundry list of problems, not least of which is an ever more dependent cow herd surviving on acreage that resembles a desert.



*Bobby (back) and Sam Burnam,
Marble Falls*

The Drought of '09: One for the Record



Steve Hubnik, Taylor

Not even common winter weeds are breaking through.

“Right now, our main concern is more for the row crops than it is the cattle, because we’re within a week (in mid-February) of needing to start planting corn and there’s no moisture in the ground,” he says.

Walking through their farm, Gerald and his business partner, Lamar Weiss, reminisce tough times of the past. Not even the dry '50s can rival what’s happening today, they say.

“I’ve been farming all my life and I’ve never seen anything quite as difficult as this,” Lamar says. “Not just because of the drought, but the economic stuff

that hit us all at the same time.”

The trio have cinched up the purse strings. Equipment use in the field is kept to a bare minimum for the sake of saving money and what moisture may lie beneath.

Lamar hopes there is enough to get his corn growing, but buckets more will be needed to stand a chance at making it to harvest. The only good news, he says, is that the drought will most certainly come to an end.

The question is, when?

Mike Heller saunters down the catwalk of the Hallettsville Livestock Commission, checking what the day’s sale might offer just minutes before cattle make their way through the ring.

Like many ranchers in his area, Mike suffers the pain of drought.

“I’ve had one, one-inch rain, and that was back last March,” he says. “And I’ve had no rain more than an inch in 18 months.

“All of us in agriculture—whether you’re a farmer or rancher—we kind of live off rainfall,” he adds. “We have to have it. It’s a requirement. And we’re accustomed to getting it. We’re not that far from the coast, and we’re used to getting 38 to 40 inches of rainfall. We’ve been living on 10 or 12 inches, and that’s not enough for us.”

Mike runs cattle on three different spreads near Yoakum. In an area where bluebonnets and buttercups should already be making spring appearances, bare ground and bone-dry water sources are the norm. Mike has seven stock tanks. Six are dry.

He says 2007 offered ranchers a good hay year, so many are surviving the dry times on two-year-old hay.

“But when you run out of water, hay does you no good,” Mike points out.

Many are left with no other option than the sale barn. Sadly, most of the old culls were sold months ago, says Mike, who is also one of four partners in the Hallettsville auction. Local ranchers are starting to dig deeper in their herds.

Sale runs in mid-February were totaling 2,200 to 2,400 head, with roughly 550-650 cows as part of those numbers. Mike says normal sale figures for that time of year are 1,200-1,300 head, with 125-150 cows.

Still, Mike doesn’t suspect there will be many ranchers calling it quits anytime soon.



Mike Heller, Hallettsville

The Drought of '09: One for the Record

“These folks stay pretty tough—they really are,” he says. “Yes, they’ll complain. But we’re complainers by nature, a little bit, because we’ll complain about it not raining enough or cattle not being high enough or everything costs too much...”

“But overall, these are pretty tough-hearted people,” he adds. “They got some stick to them, and they will. A lot of them are surviving. They won’t like it, but they’ll survive it.”

Korvan Kreuzler double-times as he steps down from his tractor, having just hauled a roll of hay to his dusty fields.

He sees the crew from *Texas Agriculture* and offers a warm smile, though it seems his mind is elsewhere. Ironically, the last time they visited his New Braunfels ranch, his tanks were full and the grass was thigh-deep following the torrential summer downpours of 2007.

That was nearly his last rain.

On a positive note, Korvan has taken advantage of the dry times to clean and enlarge his tanks, a project he says has been ongoing since 1995. Were it not for the tank cleaning, he says he’d be hauling water to his livestock right now, not just feed.

But beyond the tanks, the positives run short.

Like David Kraft—his farming partner—Korvan has seen some tough times since he started farming.

“I would say since I got out of college in ’94, we’ve almost been in a drought since then,” the 38-year-old farmer and rancher says. “We had a good year in ’95, but it quit raining in, like, July... We’ve been in a sporadic drought since then.”

“They didn’t train that in school—what to do in a drought,” he says. “But you learn your lessons very quickly and try to move on from there.”

In addition to his own farming and ranching ventures, Korvan’s a seed dealer for Pioneer.

“There is very much indecision right now,” Korvan says, noting local farmer attitudes. “It’s very iffy. Some seed has been delivered, and some of it is sitting there, waiting.”

Some will ultimately switch from corn to milo,



*Jackie Kraft,
New Braunfels*

Korvan predicts, and fewer fertilizers will likely be applied this year as folks curb costs. But there are those who will simply take the risk, and put their faith in relief from Mother Nature—or a healthy crop insurance premium.

“They’re just going to put it in the ground dry and hope for the best,” he says.

Difficult, too, is seeing the conditions of his pastures surrounding his homestead just west of New Braunfels.

Korvan’s managed most of the grazing through pasture deferment, though those resources are quickly drying up as his cattle, sheep and goats look for food. For the sheep and goats, he gets by cutting a few oak limbs for browse. But as spring nears and the leaves shed, he knows that resource will soon be gone.

“I’m hoping we don’t have to, but if we do start running out of grass, obviously, we’re going to have to cut our herd back even more,” he says. “That’s just the facts of it.”

“But you’ve got to be optimistic that you’re one day closer to the rains,” Korvan adds. “You have to be optimistic or you’ll go a little crazy... And I don’t see any other occupation that I’d like to do than this.”

One look at Jackie Kraft and you know he’s no stranger to hard work. He has a broad back, monstrous hands and a farmer’s tan that seems to run much deeper than his skin.

Jackie says he spent most of his life in the construction business, but had the opportunity to turn to farming fulltime in 1980.

“I wished I would have done it much earlier,” he says.

So when he spoke of young David’s choice to return to the family farm in 2004, the pride in his voice came as no surprise.

“I tell you, he told me that he wanted to take over the farming,” Jackie beams, eyes sparkling. “I did the same thing when my dad reached that age.”

But while he may be a farmer at heart, Jackie’s also a father. Seeing his son face so many challenges for so many back-to-back years is no easy chore.

Most pressing for the Kraft farm is what to do with their cattle. Those bare fields surrounding the place were supposed to supply David his winter grazing.

“My dad and I talked about the cows, and...” David pauses, drawing a deep breath.

“What we finally decided was to go ahead and buy some hay,” he says. “If you sell them now, they’re not going to be worth anything. If we sold them, when we want to buy them back to replace them once it did start raining, they’re going to be too high. So we decided to go ahead and keep them...”

Those hay stocks should last the Krafts through July, David estimates.

“But if it hasn’t rained by then, there’s going to be a lot of problems,” he adds, looking down at his dust covered boots.

It’s hard to find words of comfort, Jackie says.

“There’s not a whole lot you can tell him but try and hang in there and make the best of it,” the father says. “I keep telling him, there’s better times coming.”

Looking at the bare fields, Jackie knows such words can be a hard sell.

But where words may fall short, a lifetime of leading by example speaks volumes.

“You just do it,” David says. “My personal outlook is, we’ll get through it. We’ll deal with it as it comes and hopefully things will turn around. If they don’t, then we’ll look forward to next year and try it again. I know that most people who are farming, it’s what they love, and they’re going to keep doing it no matter what, whatever it takes.”

“You either love it or you don’t,” he adds. “And this is something that I love.”