

# Farm Bureau

## HIGHLIGHT

By Ginny Mink

According to James Tew, who serves on the Hillsborough Farm Bureau Board of Directors, “Ranchers are environmentalists.” One might question this logic given the threats of taxation on cow flatulence and its carbon footprint. However, an article in Time magazine entitled, “How to Save the Grasslands: Bring in More Cattle,” would support Mr. Tew’s belief.

“Those who ranch for a living understand the significance of conservation,” he said. “Conservation is not just profitable it’s the right thing to do. If we don’t maintain our resources we hurt ourselves.” Certainly a man with such extensive ranching experience knows what he’s talking about.

Mr. Tew’s ancestors began cattle ranching in Fort Meade, FL. In 1941 they drove their cattle (via horses, not trains) up to the family’s current property located on the Hillsborough-Polk County line. The approximately 2,300 acres is home to Blackwater Creek Ranch and was purchased at about \$10 an acre (imagine trying to buy property that size today!). With at least six generations of ranchers, including four generations at Blackwater Creek, the Tew family has undoubtedly established itself in the industry.

Blackwater Creek Ranch is home to 500 brood cows and is considered a commercial cow-calf operation. They are in the business of raising calves for market. Each calf weighs about 550lbs when it’s sold and shipped out west to feed lots. According to Mr. Tew, it is more economical to ship the cattle out west than to ship extra feed here.

Since ranching has been the family business for so long, Mr. Tew jokes that some of the original herd is still there. His cattle are crossbred with a mostly Brahman influence and the ranch raises its own replacement heifers, as they’ve always done. They do, however, obtain their seedstock (or bulls) from outside the herd. Technically though, there are three separate herds on his land and they manage the bulls by rotating them through the herds.

In keeping with another family tradition, all their cattle work is done on horseback, and they breed their own horses for this purpose. Mr. Tew acknowledges the fact that many ranchers today are using ATVs or 4-wheelers but he maintains that the layout of his land, with its wooded areas and oak hammocks, is not compatible with the use of anything but horses, “plus the cows are used to it,” he says.

Given the size of his ranch it seemed logical to ask why he only had 500 cows. His answer confirmed his conservationist beliefs. Blackwater Creek Ranch voluntarily participates in the Best Management Practices (BMPs) established by the University of Florida (U.F.) and the Florida Department of Agriculture. “We have a one cow per four acre stocking rate which allows us to stock pile grass and use rotational grazing,” this is part of the BMPs and resource conservation.

Obviously, Mr. Tew intends to follow the BMPs, but there’s another reason for the 500 cow limit. If they raised the number of cows per acre they would be forced to purchase food rather than sustain growth via the naturally growing grass on the ranch. As it is, 2009’s hard freezes, which don’t normally occur until January,

has them utilizing 15 tons of hay a week. They roll their own hay, and luckily, have a contract with a, “hay man based on shares.”

Recently they hosted a field day in collaboration with the University of Florida. U.F. invited cooperative extension agents from 10 counties to participate in a Q & A about the BMPs in order to explain to them how to help ranchers implement the BMP program. A professor from U.F. and three people from the Florida Department of Agriculture were in attendance as well.

Blackwater Creek Ranch is owned by very passionate and compassionate people. “This land is a part of us personally. I want to see it continue. We feel like we’re feeding America, we’re feeding people, we take that very seriously – we want to offer a product that is quality and really the best product in the world.” That’s why their cows are all natural, grass-fed without the use of any growth hormones.

Aside from wanting to offer consumers a safe product, James Tew also tries to make a difference in the community. In previous years he has given “city-kids” an opportunity to experience the joy he finds in raising cattle. They have leased calves and provided free barn space for students involved in FFA and 4-H that don’t have the resources necessary to compete in fairs and festivals. Some of those opportunities for kids have changed their lives. At other times he’s given high school students employment “in an environment that’s interested in their character development.”

James Tew and his wife, Cheri, married after graduating college and were very active in their church’s ministry. They left their native Lakeland to go to seminary in New Orleans. In fact, Mr. Tew achieved both his MA and EdD in education at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and is currently a contract professor for their site in Orlando. They have two children. Andrew, 17, will be graduating soon and attending FSU on a full ride scholarship. He hopes to attain his degree in Broadcast Journalism. Their daughter, Mollie, is 11 and she’s a big help on the ranch, riding her horse alongside her father when they move cattle to different pastures.

“Ranching will increase your faith,” Mr. Tew said, and while his faith lies first and foremost in his Creator, he also has faith in old Florida traditions. He has no intentions of ever selling his land, though there have been numerous offers to develop it over the years. He says, “I’m committed to keeping this part of Florida the way it has always been.” Thankfully that means 2,300 acres of no concrete!

