



# Success comes in being a savvy business rancher

BY MARK DELAP

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**WHEATLAND** – As the country is looking at the very real possibility of ruling out COVID as an excuse for stopping business, the supply chain and financial ruin, business rancher and entrepreneur Colt Bruegman used much of it to his benefit.

He continued to build his business in a storm instead of trying to wait it out and worry about the uncertainty.

Bruegman graduated from Durango, Colorado, and after high school, he received a rodeo scholarship to attend the University of Wyoming earning a degree in Ag Business. After college, he continued to rodeo in the Professional Cowboys Association, traveling across the U.S. and abroad.

After a 10-year stint in the oil field, where he gained some valuable hands-on experience that helps him in his businesses today, he settled down, met Holly Allison from Gordon, Nebraska and together they have an eight-year-old son, Quintana (Quin), who wants to be an Army Ranger when he grows up.

In the barn near the Laramie River

there are many inscriptions from an era gone by. Inscriptions including how many chickens they had in 1921 and how high the corn was in 1919. The oldest inscription is dated 1909 and it reads, “TO MF MULLIN Inscription by A.S. Roach (who used to be the sheriff of Platte County between 1917-23 Inscription) I left my happy home for love.”

The Bruegmans could seriously write a book entitled, “Notes from the corn crib.”

The land that is now the Bruegman ranch is split by I-25 along the Laramie River.

“We raise cattle,” Bruegman said. “We have about 200 head of cattle. We do embryo transfer into those cows, so they are recipient cows.”

“The original land was purchased in ‘45’ from the Mullin family by my grandfather’s brother, Jack Bruegman, he passed in 1985,” Bruegman said. “He left it to his only daughter, Jackie Bruegman Hixson, and when she died unexpectedly in 2010. She left it to her two boys. One of those boys was John Hixson, and the other, Jeff Hixson, he still lives in Wheatland



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**During COVID when other ranchers were trying to figure out how they were going to make it, Colt Bruegman was coming up with alternative plans and began to sell flat beds that could be installed to existing pickup trucks.**

and works for the railroad, he was a Marine...A lot of people don’t know Jackie Hixson was Jackie Bruegman, my dad’s first cousin.”

The dream of owning a ranch that has been in the family for 77 years ap-

*see RANCHER page 2*



# Rancher: The business of genetics

FROM PAGE 1

peals to the Bruegman's. The picturesque valley is a daily reminder of how blessed they are to raise their son on the Laramie River.

"A lot of times, the first generation builds the ranch, but it's cool when it gets passed down through generations," Bruegman said. "My dad had kind of a premonition about this place one time. He registered a brand in Platte County and my cousin asked him why he did that and he said, 'you never know, someday we might end up with Uncle Jack's place.' He didn't live to see it as he died in '01. In 2011, we were able to buy it. My dad's family ranches in Wyoming from the 1870s and we're double bred Germans, as my father, Bruegman, married a Hendricks, when I did the ancestry, and it all went back to the Rhine Valley on both sides."

Bruegman said when they got the

ranch, it didn't look like it does today and much remodeling has been done, including the remodeling of the original barn and the addition of a new building, which will be used for welding, Bruegman's office and a vet room. With the new shop, Bruegman hopes to add a small feedlot and cattle facilities.

The original barn had no doors on it and was in rough shape. Cows had wintered in it for decades

"We got it cleaned out and found a dirt floor," Bruegman said. "Robert and Bruce Hilty, from here in Wheatland, restored the barn (and) poured the center concrete. They did a lot of work to save this old barn!"

Raising a family on a ranch can have its challenges and raising a young and adventurous boy outside of town can also be filled with wonder.

"I almost died two times!" Quin said. "But my mom tells a better story than I do."

Holly said in all the time they have

been on the ranch, they have seen only three rattlesnakes, usually when there is a flooding rain. One afternoon, as she was out lounging in the shade and reading a book, she heard two-year-old Quin laughing. She looked up and saw him hitting the ground with a stick!

"I heard the death rattle," she said. "I kind of panicked; I was afraid by the time I ran and got a shovel, I would lose the snake. The closest weapon was a pistol in a nearby truck. I found out it's very difficult to kill a snake with a 9mm gun. I put Quin and the dogs in the house, had Colt on speakerphone and went to shooting, I was crying, then went to cursing, then I almost threw up because I was so upset. After the snake was dead, I went to get Quin and he was on the kitchen table with a jar of peanut butter feeding the dog; and oh yeah, he had locked the door. Then, I had to break into the house. It's one of our survival stories of early life on a new ranch."

The main business for the Bruegmans is in the area of genetics.

"We transfer male Angus embryos into our cows. It's one step higher than artificial insemination. If AI is a Honda, embryo transfer would be a Lexus. In embryo transfer, you are taking the embryo from a high bred cow and a high bred bull and you are putting it into a recipient or a donor cow. So, like parents who can't have children, they'll hire a donor mom and she will carry their baby. We are creating high quality bulls. The Southard Ranch, they used our cows last year and they put the big Southard bulls in our cows. This year, an Angus breeder from New Mexico is putting his bull calves in our cows.

The breeder will then wait six months until the calves are weaned and take them. At six months of age, they will come preg-check our cows for

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# Rancher: keeping prices low

FROM PAGE 2

the next year and they will take their calves. We receive payment for each healthy calf.

It's a really good deal for this ranch because we have a guaranteed buyer. We don't have to negotiate; we don't have to worry about who's going to buy our calves or if we have to haul them to the sale barn. We don't have to pay a commission, or any other associated costs."

As everything goes up in price due to the economy, Bruegman has an interesting take on keeping his prices for their services the same.

"There's some things that make my operation unique," he said. "One of them is our location in the valley. I don't feed hay in the winter. The only time we've had to feed hay in the last five years was in a big snowstorm. We also have warm water. Our well produces 55-degree water. So, we don't have to hay and don't have to break ice, giving us a very low overhead."

Bruegman says the process is private between the clients and the supplier, but the process is not new.

"We ran quite a few cows last year, but again, we have the environment to do so," he said. "Then, the people who buy the calves are raising them strictly for bulls. They raise them and sell them for breed bulls. They are registered Angus."

In the science of genetics, everything is not guaranteed and nature will have its way in determining the yield.

"If say, we put embryos in 200, you'll be lucky to have approximately 125 that catch," he said. "And then, we have a certain number we put Charolais Bulls on. Mainly because Charolais is a good terminal crop to sell big calves. That's called the cleanup bull. And we don't retain any replacement heifers."

That is another management practice Bruegman has come to define and refine for his operation.

"We can sell the heifer at six-months old; we can bank that money and we can buy cattle that are ready to breed next year," he said. "And that makes



The Bruegman family, from left, Quin, Holly and Colt. They are on a ranch in Wheatland originally homesteaded by the Mullins family. It then came into possession by his family and here, years later, it's still a Bruegman ranch.

more sense. When the cows are beyond their years to bring forth calves, we bring them to market and sell them."

During the time of COVID, Bruegman mentioned, if you had a lot of inventory and those prices went up,

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# Rancher: ranching from the 1870s

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there is a chance of making a lot more money.

“Another situation born from inflation is if you had inventory you purchased prior to COVID and you chose not to replace that stock,” he said. “If you had 1,000 bolts and they cost \$1, and the price went to \$4, and you chose not to replace those bolts, you made an extreme amount of money. I think that’s what happened to a lot of businesses, and I think that’s a large part of the cash mystery that hit the world. People had assets sitting around they could sell and then go and buy what they really wanted or needed. That’s part of the economics that really hit me and it took me a while to figure it out. Not all this money was coming from the government.”

His other business he runs is a deer bumper add-on for trucks, which actually profited from COVID. The company is called “Fearnodeer.com.”

“Our bumper demand went up 100%,” he said. “How is that possible? People sold assets, they had to get something they might not have been able to afford before COVID hit. We have 55 bumpers here. The bumpers we have are made by the Menonite community. The bumper guards are called ‘Fear No Deer.’ The reason this works, is we also sell GR trailers. They fill these trailers with these bumpers. Now, for years I was a Ranch Hand dealer, but they came out of Dallas, Texas, and it cost \$200 freight to get each one up here. So, I had to charge more. When I found a way to get the trailers up here with



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**Colt Bruegman is a Platte County rancher and entrepreneur. One of the many side businesses that he has is selling and installing deer guards on the front of vehicles that are special made for the year, make and model of the vehicle. Bumper guards and flatbeds sold through the Bruegman ranch are all installed on site. It has become a one-stop operation.**

the bumpers inside for free, I charged the freight to the trailers, the bumpers come for free. It makes a better price point and value for the customer.”

This business is lucrative for Bruegman and like he says, it’s a lot easier than raising cattle because the bumpers don’t need to be fed, watered, vetted. And they don’t die. Right now, Bruegman sells about 200 bumpers a year.

“I was the first one to carry this type of replacement grill guard” Bruegman said. “I sold to other dealers who now sell the same product.”

Each bumper is specifically made for the varying vehicles that are being sold. In addition, Bruegman’s shop will install the bumpers to the vehicle for a minimal charge. As soon as a factory changes a style of vehicle, Bruegman’s operation has

to change bumpers to fit.

When COVID hit and the supply chain was affected, the GR trailers were backordered, but Bruegman had enough trailers pre-COVID that it didn’t cause too much of a lull in business.

“These bumpers are a no-brainer and I think every vehicle should have one,” Bruegman said. “It will cause minimal and in some cases no damage to the vehicles and they can actually save your life. I had a man call me emotional at 5am, telling me that he hit an elk with his car full of family. He told me, ‘Your bumper saved our lives.’”

As the trailer shortage came about, Bruegman didn’t sit on his hands and didn’t decide to weather the storm. Instead, he trimmed his sails and headed for another harbor.

“When the trailer business reached year long waiting periods, I searched to find a flatbed manufacturer that was on the ball,” he said. “I found this company called ‘Crownline’ in Perry, Oklahoma. They were only six-weeks out. And that makes a difference because if someone comes and wants a flatbed or bale bed and we can supply it. Other manufacturers were anywhere between 18 and 40 weeks out. You can’t run a business like that. So, we picked up Crownline because they were so fast and quality is amazing.”

All in all, Bruegman is living his dream and making hay not only when the sun shines, but when it’s pouring rain over the entire nation. He never stops thinking, and he never stops working. And for him, that lifestyle works just perfectly.

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**TOP:** Wind blows snow over the Laramie Mountain range west of Wheatland in mid-January. **BOTTOM:** A longhorn bull grazes in a pasture in rural Platte County.

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# With wildfires on the rise, study compares techniques for limiting them

## Management of forest stands may help, team finds

BY LILLIE HOFFART, WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY  
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**WYOMBRASKA** – The summer of 2022 proved to be consistently hot and dry. Unfortunately, the drought monitor indicates much of Nebraska and southeastern Wyoming are going to continue experiencing conditions ranging from moderate drought to exceptional drought. Drought conditions, coupled with predicted above-average temperatures and below average precipitation could present some of the same potential for fire hazards in 2023 as the summer of 2022.

For farmers and ranchers in Nebraska and Wyoming, fires present a significant danger to crops, grass, livestock and more. Fortunately, the University of Nebraska has been working in cooperation with other education and research institutions to develop solutions to the continuing threat of wildland fires.

Nearly 19,000 acres burned around the Nebraska National Forest at Halsey in early October, according to the U.S. government. The same month, more than 50 additional wildfires were reported across the state.

With the wildfire season reaching further into autumn and concern growing about the loss of structures, ecosystems and lives, scientists at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are evaluating how to manage landscapes to be more robust against future fire threats. A study published in the journal *Ecosphere* compared how two land management techniques may impact Nebraska forests’ resilience against wildfires.

“We are seeing more wildfires in the Great Plains,” Victoria Donovan, the study’s first author and a former postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Agronomy and Horticulture, said. “... Because of the large fires that have been happening out West, there has been a push for forest management that reduces wildfire risk and for research on the effectiveness of that management.”

Fires spread both horizontally through a forest and vertically, reaching from the ground to branches and shrubs and even into crowns, or tops of trees. Blazes that spread into treetops are classified as crown fires and are generally the most intense and ecologically damaging. Many management techniques emphasize removing potential fuels to limit fire from spreading vertically into canopies and from tree to tree.

One such technique, targeted grazing, is a practice whereby cattle graze throughout forest stands. Grazing reduces fuels on the forest floor and prevents young trees from establishing in the forest understory. The other technique modeled in the study, mechanical thinning, includes physically removing lower branches and small trees. Both methods can increase the gap that fire must jump to reach higher strata. Reducing crown size in mechanical thinning also limits how fire can spread between the tops of trees.


“If you have a really large distance

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# Fire: removing potential fuels

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between the ground and your canopy fuels, you are going to need a really intense fire to create the flame lengths and heat in order to ignite the crown,” Donovan, now an assistant professor at the University of Florida, said. “If you have a more continuous vertical fuel distribution, then it is going to be a lot easier for the fire to transfer from the ground into your tree crown.”

To better understand the techniques’ effectiveness in Nebraska’s ponderosa pine forests, Donovan’s team used models to quantify the probability of crown fire in forests managed with targeted grazing and crown thinning. The researchers first censused a forest to account for how vegetation — or fuel — was vertically distributed. They then simulated the two management techniques by altering vegetation layers in their model to represent each management approach, increasing the distance the fire needed to transfer vertically from the ground to higher branches. The model evaluated how likely crown fire was to occur in those forests under different climate conditions.

“Fire is difficult to study, especially wildfire, because you don’t know when it is going to happen or where it is going to happen,” Donovan, who conducted the study through Nebraska’s Extreme Fire Research Lab, said. “Modeling allows us to estimate wildfire outcomes without having to wait for a wildfire to occur.”

The team found that targeted grazing did not substantially reduce vertical fire spread in forests. Mechanical thinning was much more effective, as it increased the average fuel gap by about 24 feet — roughly 12 times greater than by targeted grazing alone. Combining the two techniques increased that gap even more, by up to 24.5 feet. That distance also decreased the likelihood of fires reaching the crown under mild and moderate wildfire conditions.

However, even combining the two techniques failed to avoid crown fire under high-risk wildfire conditions,



LOGAN DAILEY/WYOMING NEWSPAPERS, INC.

**An aerial image of burned ground north of Lingle after area fire departments extinguished the July fire caused by lightning the night before.**

when weather is most conducive to wildfire spread.

“Our study shows that focusing on management at the scale of a forest stand can only do so much to prevent crown fire under more extreme conditions, particularly as things get more favorable to fire under climate change in the future,” Donovan said.

Donovan emphasized that fire is not inherently bad, as crown fire can benefit diversity and create new habitats for wildlife species. Moreover, ponderosa pine forests possess adaptations, like thick bark, which make them more resilient to forest fires.

When a fire travels through a ponderosa forest, it naturally causes self-thinning by removing lower branches and increases the distance that future fires need to travel from the ground to the canopy, Donovan said. However, because

fires have been historically suppressed, that self-thinning has not occurred. Understory fuels have accumulated, creating conditions for high-intensity fires that can harm even fire-resilient trees.

“One of the concerns is that since we’ve suppressed fire in these systems for so long, they’ve become very fuel-dense and homogenous,” Donovan said. “Right now, a lot of our treatments focus on changing the stand structure or individual trees in a stand without thinking about the landscape, how that has been altered by fire suppression, and how that has reduced the resilience of the forested system.”

One potential solution, she said, would involve focusing on how fire spreads across the landscape more broadly. Implementing more variety in land cover, including areas with low amounts of fuel, could limit wildfire spread and intensity.

“You can envision a giant homog-

enous stand of trees. If you were to light a fire on one end of it, it can just spread through the entire thing unimpeded,” Donovan said. “But if you manage your landscape by creating heterogeneity that would have emerged from mixed-severity fires historically ... that could help protect the forest as a whole.”

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