

# Ranch on Navajo Nation



The Totsonii Ranch just outside of Chinle, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation was started about 15 years ago with an educational program for students and special visitors from the eastern United States as its main activity.

In 1996, Lee Bigwater officially restructured the ranch business into a commercial trail riding business. He invested in some hardy and agile mustang horses, which are the basis for its day-to-day operations. A barn and pen, and the buildup of inventory in the form of saddles, overnight camping gear, and other items, also required considerable investments.

The ranch ([www.totsoniiranch.com](http://www.totsoniiranch.com)) is situated on both Navajo ancestral and customary use land next to Canyon de Chelly National Monument. This combination of unique natural resources and cultural history allows for considerable flexibility in the operation's horse riding activity while at the same time fully respecting the area's constraints and limitations of water, vegetation, land use, culture, and protected prehistoric sites.

Three types of trail rides are offered: rides of a few hours, half-day rides, and all-day rides ex-

tended to include overnight campouts.

Totsonii Ranch's human resources consist mainly of a strong family team with great involvement. Bigwater, his sons, mother, uncles, and other relatives – each with their defined roles and responsibilities – provide the foundation for a family-friendly operation. The ranch also employs four or so hired helpers who have their roots in the local area and are all familiar with the history, culture, and customs of the Navajo Nation.

There are many expenses related to operating the ranch. Great attention must be paid to daily care of the horses plus their feeding and breeding regimes, all representing significant operational costs. There are considerable expenses to hiring tour guides and cooks and purchasing supplies for the trail rides and overnight events. Trucks must be maintained and repaired and kept fueled. Insurance premiums are high; advertising costs, including maintenance of the ranch Web site, also factor in the expenditure budget. Other costs include fees for the use of national parks and for conducting business on the Navajo Nation.

# develops trail riding business

The Bigwater family has recognized the importance of a strong business plan to guide its "production," keep tight control on costs, and allow for further evolution of the business. In 2001, Christian Bigwater, Lee's son and a graduate in business marketing, established a specific business plan for the Totsonii Ranch as the basis for a new and innovative approach for the family. This plan has been the key to considerations about the ranch's future. Elements of the plan include diversifying (providing guest accommodations and offering other visitor draws such as rug weaving), joining a larger advertising association, and ensuring water supplies to the ranch.

A distinct feature of ranch management is that each individual has a well-defined role under the venture – clear and without question. Efforts to ensure optimal customer relations are given high priority. The family wants visitors to go home feeling satisfied and itching to tell others about

their adventure. The family members, the hired guides, and others involved practice professionalism daily.

The marketing side of the ranch is very active using a variety of tools. The Web site for this Navajo-owned business has a well-developed, user-friendly design that is a great promotional means for reaching new and repeat customers. With enticing pictures of Canyon de Chelly, trail rides, horses, personnel, and activities at the ranch, the site also links to outside articles and stories that reflect well on the Totsonii operation.

Totsonii Ranch is a great example of an enterprise taking stock of what it has to offer and building on those strengths. It has developed and now follows a business plan. It works within the traditions and limitations of its location to offer activities that draw visitors. It makes use of family members and local residents as a team with clearly defined duties and a commitment to profession-

alism. It markets its services well, and it is looking toward the future using its plan as a roadmap. As the Navajo people say: "You can do it if you believe in it, and it will be up to you; no one else will determine your fate."

If interested in opportunities like this, some resources for information include:

1. "Western Profiles of Innovative Agricultural Marketing: Examples from Direct Farm Marketing and Agri-Tourism Enterprises" downloadable at <http://cals.arizona.edu/AREC/wemc/westernprofiles.html>

2. "Farming Alternatives: A Guide to Evaluating the Feasibility of New Farm-Based Enterprises." The 88-page document cost is \$8 and is available for order at [www.nraes.org/](http://www.nraes.org/). Use the search function.

3. "Agricultural Business Planning Templates and Resources: Business and Marketing Resource List" available at [http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/agriculture\\_planning.html](http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/agriculture_planning.html). The site's main page is [www.attra.ncat.org/](http://www.attra.ncat.org/)



*Prunell Charley is a former member of Arizona Cooperative Extension and an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation. Russ Tronstad is a professor and extension economist in the department and can be reached at (520) 621-2425 or [tronstad@ag.arizona.edu](mailto:tronstad@ag.arizona.edu). Trent Teegerstrom is an associate specialist in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of Arizona. He can be reached at (520) 621-6245 or [tteegers@ag.arizona.edu](mailto:tteegers@ag.arizona.edu).*