



featured

STRIVING TO BE WHERE

Rawlins couple employ sustainable strategies to develop local foods enterprise

By Kellie Chichester and Mae Smith

Nestled at the base of the uplift just north of Rawlins sits the Meadow Ranch, where four generations of Smiths have lived.

The youngest generation at the Meadow Ranch wants to benefit the land while producing a healthy, natural food. They are driven to have their business be as close to environmentally sustainable as possible.

Highlands brought to America

The Highland breed came to the United States in the 1920s, according to the American Highland Cattle Association. SF Biddle was recorded to have unloaded three carloads of heifers and bulls at Moorcroft and trailed them to the Powder River. An association for the breed (originally the American Scotch Highland Breeders Association) officially began August 30, 1948.



Joshua Ray Smith grew up here. After a 14-year foray away during which he met his wife, Sarah, he returned in July 2010 to join his parents and grandparents on the ranch. Joshua had a good job as an art professor at the University of Michigan with a budding sculpture studio on the side. However, the inspiration for his art came from back home where he felt closest to the land.

Sarah worked at restaurants where they served locally grown, grass-fed beef. The couple were inspired by the local foods movement and wanted to be a part of it in a bigger way.

"We wanted to *be* where our food comes from," says Josh.

Return to Wyoming

They did not have the land or infrastructure to meet this goal in Michigan, so they returned to the ranch in Wyoming where they could raise and sell their own food. The ranch had been a working cattle ranch for years but was not operating at the time. Before moving, Josh and Sarah researched what breed of beef they wanted to raise.

"Initially, as our ultimate goal is to produce food rather than commodities, part of our motivation was

to seek a heritage breed that could thrive in our environment," says Josh. The Highland breed is one of the oldest breeds and has one of the purest existing genetic lines."

The couple loved the flavor, texture, and health benefits of natural, grass-fed Highlands meat (which they had eaten in Michigan) and were excited about the prospect of raising their own. Josh's parents and grandparents were hesitant about having Highlands on the ranch, but after seeing the new operation, are very supportive.

Their source for Scottish Highlands ended up being closer than expected. They purchased their starter animals from a breeder in Michigan: six heifers, three steers, and a bull. They brought them with them when they moved home. Josh and Sarah not only wanted to raise natural, grass-fed beef but also to take them through the whole process and finish them on grass. They bought the steers so they could get a jumpstart on the finishing process, which takes 24-32 months. They wanted to have finished steers ready for market by 2011.

landowners

THEIR FOOD COMES FROM



Josh and Sarah Smith want to sustainably raise natural, grass-fed Highlands on his family's ranch near Rawlins.

Expanding the Herd

In April 2012, the couple expanded their herd by purchasing eight cows, four heifers, and two steers from a Wyoming breeder.

"Our original genetics come from LEA White Farms in Michigan," Josh says. "We will be developing (expanding) our herd's genetic line with an intensive breeding program and plan to bring genes in via bulls from Highlands all across the country, possibly even Scotland by implementing

AI (artificial insemination)."

They also plan to cross the Highlands with other breeds.

"Developing Highland traits that improve carcass quality means that we work to develop a mid-sized, short-legged, rugged-landscape loving, grass-eating cow," says Josh. "We do not strive for marbling as a standard carcass trait. Most importantly, our beef quality will come from developed genetics that best fit and are best adapted for optimal

performance in our area and on our specific land and grass."

Josh and Sarah said direct selling and selling at small markets in Wyoming is a challenge for local producers because Wyoming has no USDA-inspected processor.

"We have used a processor with a great new facility in Hudson, who is state-certified, which will allow us to sell beef directly, at farmers markets, and retail as long as the meat never leaves the state," says Josh.

Their 10-Year Plan

They sold their finished steers directly to consumers and are accepting orders for the steers that will be ready this fall. Their 10-year plan, inspired by Sarah's experience in Michigan restaurants, is to sell natural, grass-fed, and finished beef to local and high-end restaurants.

"We are researching alternative USDA inspection processing facilities in Colorado that would allow us to sell our products out of the state of Wyoming," Josh says.

They understand that raising local food is founded on the principles of sustainable food practices and land conservation. Josh attended the Management-intensive Grazing school offered by the University of Wyoming Extension last spring in Wheatland (go to

barnyardsandbackyards.com, click on Magazine, and see the Fall 2011 edition for the story).

He wanted to learn how to use cattle to increase pasture production while improving the land. Last winter, they fed locally grown Garrison grass hay to introduce seed to their pastures through feeding. This summer, they plan to implement as many of the Management-intensive Grazing principles and other good stewardship practices as they can with their small, but growing, herd.

"We continue to develop an ongoing project of harvesting the sun's renewable energy through the grass grazed by cattle, where grazing management and land conservation are reciprocal," he notes.

High Tunnel This Summer

They have plans for more than just locally grown beef. They



Josh Smith draws upon the aura of Wyoming as inspiration for his artwork.



The Smiths are using Highland breed traits to develop mid-sized and rugged-landscaping loving cattle.

received a grant through the Natural Resources Conservation Service for a high tunnel, which they will build this summer. Plans are to grow produce, mostly greens and herbs, and to start other vegetables to feed the three generations of family on the ranch and sell what they can to the community and at farmers markets.

They are also building their own log house with logs from the Medicine Bow National Forest milled in Encampment. They have two pygmy goats for weed control. Chickens, for egg and meat production, are also in the plans but may have to wait until next summer or later. As is the case for many busy couples, they must make changes in stages, working toward fulfillment of their long-term plans.

Sarah works fulltime as an education specialist for the Carbon County Higher Education Center, and Josh is taking care of the cattle, building their house, his art studio, and creating

beautiful art. Josh's art consists of sculpture, public art, architectural ironwork, fabrication, and custom furniture.

His inspiration comes from his surrounding environment. He tries to capture how people think about the land. "My work is an investigation of our influence on the land and land's influence on us," he explains.

Their work, plans, and aspirations very much reflect their commitment to spreading awareness about locally grown foods through land conservation.

To learn more

Check these websites:

- The art: joshuaraysmith.com
- The beef: upliftgrassworks.com
- American Scotch Highland Breeders Association: highlandcattleusa.org

Kellie Chichester and Mae Smith are University of Wyoming Extension educators. Chichester can be reached at (307) 721-2571 or at kelliec@uwyo.edu. Smith can be reached at (307) 321-7558 or at maep@uwyo.edu.