



The rigors and challenges of organic ranching

by Jim Fossett
NKC Tribune reporter

THORP – Former westside builder and developer Greg Newhall says he didn't plan on having a sudden enlightenment on the essential nature and meaning of organic food – not to the point that at the age of 56 he would jump track to build from the ground up an organic ranching business in Thorp. But that's exactly what has happened. There's no saying the last eight years getting the business going have been a cakewalk. From the outside looking in, liken the lifestyle change he and his wife chose to what a deer feels like after being pancake'd on a road stripe. And let that be a warning: Until you get to the other side of the road, starting an organic ranch from scratch means routine pancake'ings in ways a city dweller never dreamed of.

"There have been challenges," laughed Greg, now 64. Wife Laurie expressed it another way, one that reflects the sense of humor the couple seems to be blessed with. "My mother-in-law was here last week when we were out looking for goats that had wandered off.

"She looked at me and said, 'Did you ever think you'd be doing something like this?'" "I said, 'No. I really had no idea.'" On that note we had a good laugh."

The Setting

The Newhall's bought a several hundred-acre working ranch overlooking the Yakima River.

From the bridge in Thorp look upward at the ridge and that's them on top, perched in an eagle's nest of sorts with stunning views of the valley.

The ranch is fenced into 24 paddocks. Their first harvest of orchard grass fetched 168 tons, about 2,860 bales.

Bitter brush litters the landscape. Greg said it's 17-percent protein, great for cattle.

The Newhall's are the guardians of over 2,000 living creatures: Chickens, cows, sheep, goats, llamas, turkeys, horses, dogs, pigs and peacocks.

Waterfowl frequently visit the couple's pond below the ranch.

Birdfeeders near the house are usually busy with songbirds.

Feisty little kids (goats) romp around the picnic table while Greg and Laurie steal a moment for a hot mug of morning coffee or an ice-cold tea in the afternoon.

On a warm summer day, the greens and auburns, the smell of sweet grass and wildflowers, and the sound of a light breeze sweeping pastureland can lullaby a person to sleep.

Okay. That's enough. Cut. Print. Time to talk about the gritty, real life challenges Greg, Laurie and son Bradley face as they try to do something they all believe is good for human health and well being.

To set the stage, when they got into it, none of them had a single skill set that would have prepared them for life as organic ranchers. They've learned everything from the

school of hard knocks.

Reality Meets Passionate Conviction

Compiled over the course of several interviews, here's the short list of things that set organic ranchers up to test their metal.

■ They're on call 24-hours a day.

■ They pay 50-percent more for organic corn and soy to feed their animals the good stuff. To meet the challenge of rising costs Greg bought a 40-foot cargo container in which he grows racks of sprouts.

■ Goats wander off and have to be rounded up periodically, but you already knew that.

■ There are egg-stealing skunks, owls and hawks – and coyotes to contend with.

The ranch foreman put a radio in a tree that plays Mexican music to keep the owls at bay. It works ... somewhat.

"We still get one or two a night. We're like McDonald's for owls," Greg smiled. "In one year we lost 40 chickens to coyotes. We now have Anatolian-Great Pyrenees dogs that protect all our animals. Since we got the dogs we haven't lost a chicken."

Greg did have to build a portable coop for his free-range chickens, basically a roof on wheels. The device works well to deter predatory birds and it keeps chicken droppings from piling up in one place.

■ Every day Greg and Laurie fetch, clean and carton up to 15 dozen eggs they either sell from the ranch or deliver to three storeowners outside Thorp.

■ The Newhall ranch is ten miles from the entrance to the Teanaway, home to a Gray wolf den. Enough said.

■ To manage wheel lines and other irrigation tasks in season is an eight-hour a day job for two people.

■ Every single day the Newhall's feed hundreds of mouths.

■ Rigorous wintertime preventive maintenance is never enough. It could be a fire extinguisher on the blink. It could be a tractor. There's always something.

Their inventory includes a half dozen tractors, two swathers, a 14-foot-wide lawnmower, a baler – all of which incur a property tax.

Greg said he's read a fair share of user's manuals over the years.

■ It takes 2.5 years for a Waygu cow to mature for market. The gestation period for a pig is 114 days, and it takes another 10 months for it to mature. During the in-between, anything can go wrong.

■ Cheat grass is an unwelcome intruder. It can kill cattle and ruins the value of the hay crop.

■ Knapweed is a problem, too, like it is elsewhere in the county. Recently Greg cooperated with WSU entomologist Jennifer Andreas on a regionally based project. She came to the ranch and released containers of insects that live and feed on knapweed. He said he'll see what happens.

■ The Newhall's process all their meat for customers right there on the ranch.

■ February and March mud: Greg says it takes the dream out of 'living the dream.'

■ To bolster the bottom line, Greg still works two days a week on the westside, and he does some contract farming on the side.

■ In 2013, it will have taken the Newhall's three years to get their pastureland certified organic. The fee for certification runs about \$2,000.

■ When they're not doing ranch work, the Newhall's are guiding tours of the ranch or inside on the computer, marketing, educating or doing bookwork.

A Welcomed Sacrifice

Time to do the things they love to do isn't always available.

Greg said he hasn't paraded in ten years, and that's a passion of his.

"My lifestyle has changed so much," Laurie smiled. "I liken myself now to an emergency room doctor – I never know what I'll be doing next."

"If we need to be working with the cows I'm out there with a clipboard. If a shipment of chicks comes into the post office, I'm on the road to get them. I always know which box is mine because I can hear them peeping," she laughed.

"I remember one shipment of about 400. Once they're safely back at the ranch you have to take each one gently by the beak and touch it to water, so they learn how to drink.

"It's such a different lifestyle for me. On the westside my girlfriends and I regularly got together for lunch or dinner or shopping.

"I belonged to a chorus and we met every Monday night.

"On that side of the mountain there were a lot more phone calls with friends planning or touching base.

"For all of those reasons I was more social over there and I miss it. That was my life.

"Here on the ranch it's working the ranch and keeping things under control, keeping the fridge stocked, being here to take care of Greg.

"We do entertain a lot. People we know love to come for a day or a week, so that makes up for it. I don't think we've had a weekend here without guests."

Son Bradley agrees.

"I've got friends, mom and dad have friends who are just looking to work on a ranch, maybe turn a wrench or shovel manure, so they can be part of it. We have a friend coming soon who wants to build bat boxes for us. And if I had to explain why he's doing it – it would be to experience the dramatic change of lifestyle here versus the city."

Intangible Rewards

Greg is evangelical about organics and raising animals the old way to ensure they are the healthiest they can be come market time.

He would tell you that you don't put sand in your car's gas tank – and you don't put bad food in your body.

"I believe we're providing great nutrition for a person's



GREG NEWHALL at the entrance to his ranch, a home for over 2,000 mouths to feed. N.K.C. Tribune Jim Fossett photo • 2012



NEWHALL with the mobile chicken coop he built for his free-range chickens. N.K.C. Tribune Jim Fossett photo • 2012



EACH ANATOLIAN-GREAT PYRENEES the Newhall's own lives with a different animal family, be it pigs or cattle or hens, so they become part of the family and – instinctively – protect the family as if it were its own. This one is taking in an afternoon snooze. N.K.C. Tribune Jim Fossett photo • 2012



THE NEWHALL RANCH in Thorp. Below the ridge on the other side of the buildings you see is the Yakima River and the bridge into town. N.K.C. Tribune Jim Fossett photo • 2012

body and that's a fundamental part of life.

"You need to do preventative maintenance on your body and filling it up with good fuel is part of that.

"My son and I smile when we're doing our work because it's good work, honorable work, a great service for people who want clean food. I absolutely believe in it."

Deferred Gratification

A beef cow takes Greg 2.5 years to get to market. A pig ten months after a 114-day gestation period, meaning there is no instant gratification in ranch work.

"I don't think it's patience that you need," Greg said. "It's the commitment."

"This generation is interested in a quick turnaround, and this type of work requires commitment. Take care of business and rest later. You can take a vacation but you'd better have a capable substitute on the job while you're gone.

"Commitment to a lifestyle can be incredibly attractive, but very demanding on your time and attention.

"Ranching and farming is definitely a life of deferred gratification."

Greg uses the example of an astounding Stanford University study.

"In 1972 psychologist Walter Mischel offered a marshmallow to each of several children. If the child could resist eating the marshmallow, he promised he would return with another. Mischel then analyzed how long each child resisted the

temptation.

"Years later, he discovered the children who resisted the temptation and got the second marshmallow, turned out to be, without exception, very successful in their adult lives.

"The bottom line was, those children and the adults they became understood the rewards of deferred gratification and benefited from that."

Smiled Greg's son Bradley: "When it comes to ranching, we're both subscribers of the two-marshmallow rule. In fact, the tracks have been laid and we're getting our second marshmallow yearly."