

CWF FARMER PROFILE: Kerry O'Brien

Bourbon County

**Paint Creek
Marmaton WRAPS**

By Connie Pantle



Jason Sutterby, O'Brien Cattle Company, Inc. employee, and Kerry O'Brien, OCCI manager, explain how they utilize a "Bud Box" to bring cattle into the working facility. The cattle company utilizes low-stress handling practices which were highlighted at a recent tour at the working facility.

Photo by Connie Pantle

Hepler, Kansas—Kerry O'Brien is a man of few words. What he does on his cattle operation in Southeast Kansas speaks volumes however.

O'Brien, who operates a non-confined starting and backgrounding operation just north of Hepler, was born and raised in the cattle business. He's applied that long-term knowledge to how O'Brien Cattle Company Inc. backgrounds cattle.

In addition to running a non-confined operation, O'Brien practices low-stress handling of cattle. O'Brien said the non-confinement and low-stress handling go hand-in-hand and make his operation more profitable. "I want to work and make a profit, all while conserving the land for future generations."

To highlight these practices and the operation, the O'Brien Cattle Company recently hosted a tour on September 18 which drew about 150 people. The tour featured the working facilities and handling of the cattle; grassland management and riparian area protection; alternative water supply, and a tire tank installation demonstration.

The O'Brien Cattle Company uses grass traps instead of a confined feedlot. Dale Kirkham, field organizer with the Kansas Rural Center's Clean Water Farms Project (CWFP), said grass traps are basically smaller pastures with feeding facilities where much of the feed is provided. In addition the grass in the traps also provides some forage. He said "A grass trap also provides the cattle a clean place to rest out

Water Quality Concerns:

- Quality of water to Paint Creek/Marmaton River
- Erosion from ponds and stream-banks
- Cattle access to streams causing deterioration and contamination

Best Management Practices Implemented:

- Implemented grass traps (fescue and legume based) instead of a confined feeding operation
- Installed a new pond as a water source
- Installed an alternative water supply, consisting of waterline run to multiple tanks throughout grass traps
- Fenced pond and riparian area along creek

of the dust or mud, while allowing the manure to be spread by the cattle where it can be used by the grass.”

During the tour, Gary Kilgore, K-State professor emeritus of agronomy, explained the water quality benefits of grass traps versus confined operations. He said grass traps allow the cattle to “graze and dispose of animal waste where grass can benefit from the nutrients.” In addition, Kilgore said grass traps slow the water down and filter out E coli and other nutrients before the water reaches a stream.

“As landowners, we want to do the right thing,” O’Brien said. “We’re trying to do what we can do to make things safer downstream.”

The young calves are fed on grass traps of fescue which is inter-seeded with ladino and durana clovers. The fescue in the grass traps contains non-toxic endophytes, making both the fescue and the cattle more productive. The grass is divided into traps or smaller areas, which encourages the cattle to better utilize the grass. Because of the quality of the grass, O’Brien said he’s actually able to “run more cattle days and have grass left”.

Herschel George, K-State Research and Extension watershed specialist, said “in my opinion, down the line more producers are going to go to a non-confined operation.” And the O’Brien Cattle Company “is an excellent example,” he said.

Kirkham also spoke during the tour and explained the importance of wintering cattle away from creeks and protecting riparian areas along streams and creeks like the O’Briens did.

To protect water quality along Paint Creek, which is part of the Marmaton watershed and WRAPS (Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy) area, O’Brien fenced the riparian area to exclude the cattle from the creek. By protecting this area,



(Left): For an alternative watering source for his cattle, Kerry O’Brien installed a pond and ran waterlines to tanks throughout the grass traps. (Below): Dale Kirkham, CWF field organizer with KRC, discusses the water quality benefits of fencing the riparian area (as illustrated in the background), which was fenced to exclude cattle from Paint Creek, a tributary to the Marmaton River.

Photo by Connie Pantle



O’Brien said “the streambanks have been healing themselves with time.”

O’Brien said that fencing the riparian area along the creek has not reduced his productivity. “I’m grazing just as many cattle as before,” he said. To control weeds and brush, O’Brien allows the cattle to flash graze the area.

Prior to implementation of the non-confined operation, O’Brien worked with George to plan a water distribution system throughout the grass traps. George, in turn, contacted Kirkham and the CWF project to assist with funding for a pumping system, pipelines and livestock waterers throughout the grass traps. A pipeline and water tanks were distributed throughout the individual pastures to provide the cattle drinking water away from the creek.

A new pond, which was built using State Conservation Commission funding through the Bourbon County Conservation District, provided the water for

the watering system throughout the grass traps. Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams (KAWS) assisted with cost-share for the riparian fencing as well as fencing to protect the new pond.

In addition to improving water quality, O'Brien said the grass traps have improved the health of his cattle, which is especially important when dealing with high-risk cattle. Typically, the calves are weaned then shipped immediately to O'Brien Cattle Company at about 350 to 450 pounds, according to O'Brien's daughter Kallie. She said the cattle are then held on the grass traps and "after 45 to 60 days, or until healthy, they will be shipped to rye, Flint Hills or local grass depending on the time of year and then on to a finishing yard." The tour site holds 1,100 head of cattle at full capacity with eight to nine turns of cattle per year.

O'Brien said as many as 35 to 40 percent of calves on a dry lot are "doctored" while the number drops to ten to 15 percent for calves on grass traps like his. He added that the results are not only in the numbers, but in the overall improved quality of the animal.

The way the cattle are maintained allows O'Brien to pass along a better product to the public. "Consumers want to know the cattle are treated the way they ought to be," he said. "I want to do things right."

He said the practices that he uses are simple to implement and do not adversely affect his profit. The Bud Box, named after low-stress cattle handler, Bud Williams (www.stockmanship.com), was a highlight on the tour and an integral part of the cattle company's handling. The Bud Box allows a small group of cattle to load onto a trailer or walk into the chute easier. The principal of the Bud Box works with the cattle's instinct to go back to where they came into the pen.

A demonstration from O'Brien Cattle Company employees, Jason Sutterby and Steve Imhof, illustrated the ease of working cattle this way. "They practically load themselves," O'Brien said. When working



(Above): Herschel George, K-State Extension watershed specialist (center), demonstrates how to make a water tank using a large tire. (Below): Kerry O'Brien introduces his children, Klay (left) and Kallie (right) at a recent tour of the O'Brien Cattle Company Inc. The O'Brien family backgrounds calves on grass traps on the Bourbon County farm.

Photos by Mary Howell & Connie Pantle

cattle "slowing things down, actually speeds things up. And it actually increases the bottom line," O'Brien said.

O'Brien said he wanted to host the field day at his cattle company because he views people like George, Kilgore and Kirkham as invaluable resources. O'Brien said he received much more than funding through the CWFPP by working with Kirkham. "I can't say enough good things about Dale and his

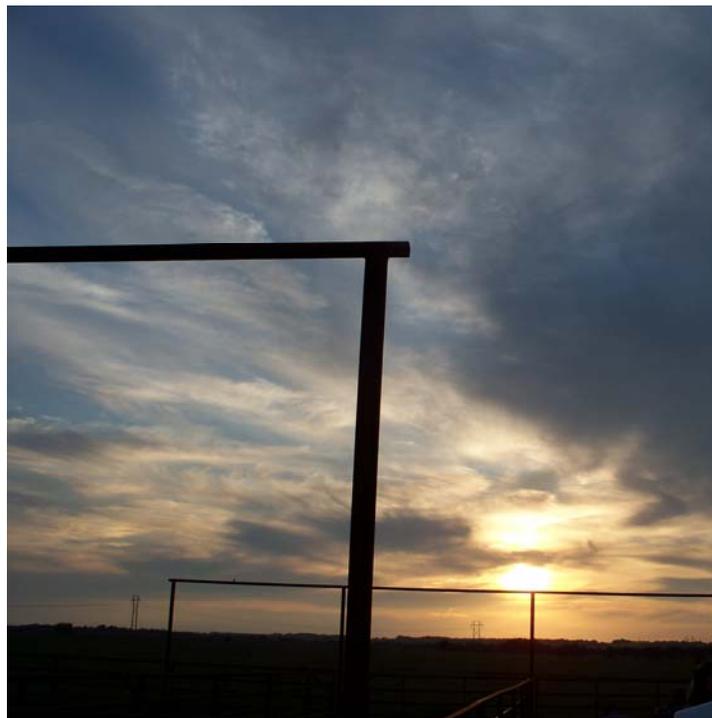
willingness to share his knowledge.” O’Brien said he learned from attending field days and listening to Kirkham and George.

George said that the O’Briens and their employees “want to get it right.” George said. “They care not only about the well- being of the livestock, but they care about the well-being of the grass and the land,” George said.

And that love of cattle and the land is something O’Brien hopes to pass down to his and wife Tammie’s children, Kolt, Kallie and Klay. “I think I have some kids who might want to come back and help out with the operation after college,” he said.

Sponsors of the tour included Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams (KAWS); KRC; K-State Research and Extension; Bourbon County Conservation District; Marmaton WRAPS; Producers Cooperative Association of Girard.

The Clean Water Farms –River Friendly Farms Project (CWF-RFFP) is coordinated by the Kansas Rural Center, administered by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and funded by U.S. EPA Non-point Source Section 319 Program funds.



A sunset concludes the beautiful evening of the tour at the O’Brien Cattle Company Inc.

Photo by Mary Howell

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