

Cows said a benefit in restoring carbon content to soil

A relatively small California cattle ranch owned by a multi-millionaire family that began as an environmental experiment has wound up as a profitable beef-growing venture but, in the meantime, has shown what farmers knew centuries ago: that cows are good for the soil and for the environment.

Herds of ruminants, ranch owners Tom Steyer and his wife, Kathy Taylor, demonstrated not only that they add natural fertilizer through their droppings but also trample decaying vegetation into the soil where it composts and becomes a fertilizer, and the soil retains the carbon content, rather than allowing it to release into the atmosphere, according to a New York Times report from Pescadero, Calif.

Mr. Steyer is the billionaire retired founder of Farallon Capital, a U.S. hedge fund. Ms. Taylor is also chief executive of One PacificCoast Bank, the community development bank she and Mr. Steyer started. She likes to be called Kat, and disregarded her husband's advice when she made a decision to sell grass-fed beef from their 1,800-acre TomKat Ranch.

Contrary to Mr. Steyer's predictions, their Leftcoast Grassfeed beef has proven to be a profitable outcome, and Mr. Steyer has wound up eating crow as, he now confesses, "We could sell 10 times the amount we raise, in 10 minutes," he told the Times.

But the couple did not set out to raise prime grass-fed beef at TomKat Ranch. The plan was to create a model conservation project, demonstrating ways to improve soil health, use solar energy and conserve water. "This wasn't about cows," Ms. Taylor said.

In Canada, Mr. Steyer is probably better known as a major opponent of Keystone XL Pipeline than as a financial manager and purveyor of beef. He has produced a number of anti-pipeline videos and is reported to be a strong supporter of President Obama.

But their belief in the value of cattle in reversing the trend of lower levels of carbon in soil, a worldwide issue that coincides with the growth of greenhouse gas emissions in the air, has been supported in a book by Julius Ruechel, according to the Times.

The book, "Grass-Fed Cattle: How to Produce and Market Natural Beef," theorized that soil was enriched as a result of the migration of giant herds of ruminants and other animals across the world's great plains.

"According to the book, large herds of heavy, hooved animals help force dead plant materials back into the ground, where they are broken down by microorganisms in the soil. Herd migration also churns up the earth, allowing rain to penetrate it further and slowing runoff, and natural 'fertilizers' containing additional microbes are left in the herd's wake," the Times said.

This was likely demonstrated on the Canadian Prairie when the herds of bison were killed off, the "buffalo grass" was ploughed under or burnt, and massive depths of topsoil turned to dust during a prolonged drought and blew away.

And, in the latter part of the 20th century, the Dryland Association in Alberta blamed the loss of deep-rooted vegetation and over-irrigation for the expansion of salt flats across the Plains of Alberta and Montana and elsewhere.

By Wes Keller