



NEBRASKA COLLEGE OF TECHNICAL AGRICULTURE

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On the trail of a ranch crew

NCTA Dean's Message by Larry Gossen, Ph.D.

Jacob Surridge of Lexington and Maddy Carr of North Platte enjoy their work.

Whether on horseback sorting and moving cattle, in a tractor feeding cows, or running the side-by-side for other agricultural duties, the two are among seven student employees on the "ranch crew" of the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture.

"My favorite part of being a student employee is when we all get together and work or just hang out together," says Carr, a veterinary technology student with interest in large animal health and management. "It's never a dull moment, and it's always fun!"

On Monday of this week, Surridge and Carr were among the ranch crew members who moved the two NCTA beef herds now at campus. More of the cattle work is now done on horseback. Surridge and his supervisor Alan Taylor were horseback that day.

The fall-calving cows and their calves were moved to graze crop residue of corn stalks. The calves will be weaned in a few weeks. The spring-calving cows which will begin to calve in March were moved to a new pasture near campus.

Ranch crew supervisor is Alan Taylor, the NCTA Experiential Learning Coordinator and an animal science faculty member who specializes in livestock nutrition. He teaches courses such as Nutrition, Feeds and Feeding, Ration Formulation, and Range Management.

Previously the NCTA "farm crew" had multidisciplinary duties based primarily with the college crops, pastures, and livestock chores at campus.

In the past two years, however, as beef herds and grassland opportunities increased for NCTA, the "ranch crew" – by preference of the students – has become the norm, says Taylor.

Surridge, a livestock industry management major, has had a variety of duties and responsibilities as he's worked for Taylor in the spring, summer and fall of 2021, and again this semester.

"I feed cows, help move cows, put out salt and mineral, and make sure the welfare of the cows and beef herd is in proper standing," Surridge explains.

Over the summer, he helped with improvements at the 2,147-acre Frank B. and Mabel Leu Ranch in Hayes County, a 45-minute drive from campus to the ranch located southwest of Wellfleet.

Leu Ranch update

The Leu Ranch was gifted through the University of Nebraska Foundation for hands-on student learning and some research to NCTA and the University's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

This past summer, along with their workload at campus livestock facilities and farm, Taylor, NCTA Farm Manager Roy Cole and the students, progressed on fencing and facilities at the Leu Ranch, building a sturdy corral where they can now gather, sort, and load or unload cattle.

Their sweat equity paid off in early September, after fall classes had resumed, with the completion of the pens, alleyways, and loading chute, all necessary for Aggie students, and the University's faculty and research specialists.

"Since those corrals were done, we could gather the cattle pastured in the summer and load them out," Taylor said.

He credits Werkmeister Welding of Armour, South Dakota, for providing a great discount on the loadout chute.

Hay from Leu Ranch ground that previously had been in Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is now hayed by a neighboring rancher, Tom Deaver of Hayes Center, on a 50-50 share. To reduce daily trips from Curtis to the ranch, Deaver offered a suggestion for checking stock wells remotely.

By installing an app on his cell phone and two game cameras at water tanks, Taylor downloaded photos and checked water levels at 3 p.m. daily. "That was very handy through the summer, and now I put one of those cameras on the calving area and corrals down at Aggieland."

Hands-on learning emphasized

NCTA will be transitioning the spring cow herd to fall calving to improve educational opportunities for the students. Fall calvers will now be bred after Thanksgiving. NCTA offers at least two classes each semester in artificial insemination, using small groups of purchased cows, which are then sold after each class. Hence, with a Spring calving schedule, students had to miss out on experiential learning of AI season as it occurred in May after the semester adjourned.

Calves born at NCTA are fed in the backgrounding lot at campus (in upgraded pens built in 2020) and will be trucked to the Leu Ranch to pasture as yearlings, a new opportunity for student classes. Since 2021 was the first grazing season at the Hayes County location, plenty of pasture was available for NCTA's herd of 24 cow-calf pairs. The college was able to purchase 37 head of fall calving cows from research herds of the University's Gudmundsen Sandhills Laboratory.

NCTA also took in 60 head of pairs owned by Pat and Jeanie Breen of Farnam to better utilize the grass resource. Breen's cattle went home for weaning and fall grazing and will soon come to campus for spring calving.

"It's a win-win for the college to provide more opportunities for the students, utilize the expanded grazing resources over at the Leu Ranch, and provide a service to a couple of fine beef industry partners," Taylor said.

Surridge will be a part of the student calving rotation when that begins in early March. With a student partner, they will take a 4-hour shift. "I'll be out there checking on cows and newborns, even if it's from a midnight to 4 a.m. shift."

Part of the University of Nebraska system, the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture is a two-year institution with a statewide mission of preparing students for successful careers in agriculture, veterinary technology and related industries. NCTA is known for its affordable tuition, high job-placement rate for its graduates, and for the success of student teams in competitive activities including crops judging, ranch horse events, livestock judging, shotgun sports, stock dog trials, and intercollegiate rodeo. The college is consistently ranked as one of the best two-year schools in the nation.



Maddy Carr of North Platte, on left, and Kyra Debuse of Lincoln use horses for their work on the ranch crew at the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture. (Photo by Alan Taylor / NCTA)



Students with the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture ranch crew sort and load cows at the corrals built last summer at the Leu Ranch in Hayes County. From left are, Jacob Surridge of Lexington, Emma Hollenback of Ewing, and Ahren Marburger of Malvern, Iowa. (Photo by Alan Taylor / NCTA)

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