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## Miles of Stewardship: The Dee River Ranch

*By Julie A. Best*

On a clear day, you can see forever on Dee River Ranch. Well, maybe not forever, but for a long, long way, from Alabama to Mississippi at least. Dee River Ranch is a family owned and operated multi-commodity farming operation located in Pickens County, Alabama, which borders Mississippi.

Daily operations of the farm are controlled by Mike and Annie Dee, a brother/sister management team. They are assisted by Annie's son, Seth. Income from this progressive 10,000 acre ranch is derived from 3,500 acres devoted to corn, wheat, and soybeans; 2,500 acres for forages and cattle production; and 4,000 acres in the Conservation Reserve Program (600 acres of trees and 3,400 acres of native grasses). The cattle operation is made up of 650 cows producing feeder calves and Angus X Brahman commercial females.



**(L-R) Terry Williamson, NRCS District Conservationist; Mike and Annie Dee. Sunflower is a new crop grown on Dee River Ranch to produce bio-diesel on the farm. Once the sunflowers have been pressed for the oil, the meal serves as a good protein source for the cattle.**

Dee River Ranch was established in Citrus County, Florida, in 1957 by J. Roy and Page Dee along with J. Roy Jr. and Mary Ann Dee. They are the grandparents and parents of Mike and Annie. It has had an Alabama presence since 1989 when the Dee family sold their Florida operation to the state as a part of the Save the Rivers program and purchased portions of the R. L. Zeigler estate in Alabama and Mississippi. The ranch is presently owned by the 12 children of J. Roy and Mary Ann Dee.



**Annie Dee said, "Precision farming enables us to improve profits and harvest yields while reducing the negative impacts of farming on the environment that come from over-application of chemicals. It also makes efficient use of fuel and our time."**

The philosophy of the Dee River Ranch operation is to insure that all land is used in a manner for which it is best suited. The ranch operates within three resource management goals:

- To protect the pastureland through management of native and existing grasses and careful introduction of improved varieties.
- To prevent soil moisture loss and erosion from croplands by using cover crops and conservation tillage methods.
- To protect highly erodible land by taking it out of agricultural production and planting trees and/or native grasses.

The Dees realize that land is the most valuable manageable natural resource available to them. They have incorporated stewardship practices on all three components of the ranch: cropland, highly erodible and environmentally sensitive land; and hay/grazing land. All three are important to the long-term sustainability of the ranch and overall profitability of the farming operation. The Dees have taken advantage of current technologies to maximize crop and beef production:

- Dee River Ranch uses global positioning system receivers on tractors, combines, and sprayers. These devices, combined with yield monitors, guidance systems, and variable rate-spray nozzles, improve the accuracy of the cropping enterprises to inches rather than acres.
- The probability of soil erosion from cropland was reduced with the increased use of winter cover crops as part of a conservation tillage cropping system.
- The Blackland Prairie soils of the Dee River Ranch can become a quagmire when wet and make cattle management nearly impossible. With improved pasture management and installation of erosion control practices such as heavy-use pads, on-farm surface water monitoring indicates that little if any soil erosion from pastures.
- Poultry litter is used to supplement commercial fertilizer for hay fields and pastures, reducing production costs and improving the sustainability of the ranch.

Mike and Annie are very stewardship conscious. Mike said, "As we think of stewardship, we can't be limited to look at next year's crops, be it corn, wheat, or cattle. We have to think about the next 10 years. We have to be improving the soil and the environment all the time because we have to produce more from every acre to maintain our livelihood and success. We have to be improving all the time, not just maintaining."

Dee River Ranch takes seriously the philosophy of using the land wisely. Much of the land managed by Dee River Ranch is best suited for pasture. Mike said, "The cattle operation is an integral part of our whole operation. It helps us utilize our acreage that is not hospitable to row crops. Some of our land is very suited to grow forage and that's the best use of the land. To be able to harvest that forage with the cattle is the most efficient use of the land."

Another example of using the land wisely is demonstrated in the installation of field borders and buffers. Annie said, "By installing riparian buffers, we have made unproductive land productive. Our equipment keeps getting larger and larger. The ends of some of our fields were not

productive and it was difficult to turn the equipment. We squared off the fields and planted those areas to trees, which creates wildlife habitat."

To combat high fuel prices and with an increased awareness of global warming, the Dees are making use of vehicles powered by alternative fuels. In cooperation with Auburn University Natural Resources Management and Development Institute, an on-farm alternative fuel production plant will be installed using soybeans, sunflowers, and canola grown on the farm.

Annie said, "Our on-the-farm bio-diesel facility will make us more sustainable as a farm. We will use the crops to make fuel and then use the co-products, the cooked soybean or sunflower meal, as a source of protein for the cattle. Nothing that we use to make the fuel will leave the farm. That is stewardship!"

Mike and Annie Dee are active participants and leaders in local, regional, and state conservation programs. They are involved in efforts to improve stewardship among the agricultural community and to enhance the public's perception of the farming industry. Dee River Ranch is always available for producer tours. The Dee family takes pride not only in showing the benefits of the stewardship practices that they have implemented, but they also gladly share the lessons that they have learned over the years.

The greatest potential impact the Dees have on the cattle industry is their activity with the Alabama Rural Medicine Program. Dee River Ranch is a learning laboratory for medical students enrolled in the University of Alabama's School of Medicine. Students learn first hand about the cattle business from a beef producer. With the stewardship practices in use on the ranch, these developing physicians see how a ranch should be operated to protect and enhance the environment.

Dee River Ranch has taken advantage of the many conservation partners available to assist them. They make full use of the technical and financial assistance available from USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The ranch has been an active participant in the deer management programs offered by the Alabama Department of Natural Resources. They participate in a surface water monitoring program coordinated by the Alabama Department of Environmental Management. They make heavy use of the USDA-National Soil Dynamics Laboratory, the Auburn University Agronomy and Soils, and the Auburn University Biosystems Engineering Departments, as well as the Alabama Cooperative Extension Systems Crops Team for assistance with the geospatial technology used on the ranch. The Auburn University Animal Sciences Department and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System Animal Science and Forages Team provide similar support to the beef cattle enterprises.

Dee River Ranch was recently selected as a regional winner in the Environmental Stewardship Awards Program (ESAP). Sponsored by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, Dow Agro-Sciences, and USDA- NRCS, the annual ESAP awards honor cattle producers whose stewardship practices are inventive, cost-effective, and contribute to environmental conservation. The Dee River Ranch was nominated by the Alabama Cattlemen's Association. The prestigious ESAP is now in its 17th year. The national winner will be selected in October and presented at the national meeting in January 2008.

Terry Williamson, NRCS District Conservationist, said, "Annie and Mike Dee are good stewards of the land. They have learned the value of partnerships in the conservation effort. They sought the help of USDA-NRCS to help them use the land that has been entrusted to them in the most efficient ways. They also partner with Auburn University and Mississippi State University, as well as numerous state commodity groups. Through the cooperation of these partners, they have become leaders in the stewardship effort in Alabama. They have combined their love of the land with a sound business plan to produce an operation that is both profitable and sustainable."

While economics is the driving force behind any business, Mike and Annie Dee have gone the extra mile to ensure that their farming operation is not only profitable but also environmentally sound. They have incorporated conservation practices into their farming operation that have

enhanced the productivity of the farm, reduced soil erosion, improved moisture retention in the soil, and provided wildlife habitat. As recognized industry leaders, the impact of the Dee family on environmental stewardship in Alabama is remarkable.

At one location on the Dee River Ranch, it does appear that you can see forever. One field on the ranch is 2,000 acres and it includes land in both Alabama and Mississippi. Annie said, "This is the largest contiguously farmed field east of the Delta." A picture can't capture that vast space, but it is very impressive, as is the entire Dee River Ranch operation.

*Julie A. Best is the Public Affairs Specialist for the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service in Auburn.*

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