



**Natural Resources  
Conservation Service**

3878 West Houston Harte Expressway  
San Angelo TX 76901  
Voice 325 944 0147 ext. 3  
Email: [donnie.lunsford@tx.usda.gov](mailto:donnie.lunsford@tx.usda.gov)  
Web: <http://www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov>

# News Release

Contact:  
Donnie Lunsford, (325) 944-0147  
[donnie.lunsford@tx.usda.gov](mailto:donnie.lunsford@tx.usda.gov)

## **Ranching on the Pecos: A prescription for healthy rangeland**

*By Donnie Lunsford, USDA-NRCS public affairs specialist*

What does the Pecos River, a pharmacist, downhill skiing, and ranching have in common? If you live near Pecos, that would be John Rediger of JR Land and Cattle Company. Rediger is a man of many talents from being a National Standard Race (NASTAR) ranked skier, a drug store owner, pharmacist, father, husband, and producer of quality Beefmaster cattle.

Ranching is an iconic piece of West Texas heritage and Rediger has more than embraced it. Since Rediger was a boy, he knew he had a connection to the land born from the time he spent with his father riding horseback across the land, working cattle on hot dusty days and cold wet ones, or checking cattle during calving season. He's still enjoying ranching more than 60 years later at 71 years old.

"It's the love of the land, love what you do, but really it is a passion. It's like my skiing, it turns into an obsession," said Rediger "I only had Saturday afternoons and Sundays because I was working at the pharmacy during the week. That fence might have taken me two years to get built, but it was fun work when you are at the ranch."

He added "The shortest path to success is to roll up your sleeves, and the biggest factor you can give the ranch or farm, is your shadow."

### **Passion turns to obsession**

Rediger was born in Houston with an asthma problem. His father followed a doctor's advice and moved the family to a drier climate in West Texas. After living in a couple West Texas towns and at the beginning of his sixth-grade year, the Rediger family settled in Pecos after buying a drug store.

J R Land and Cattle Company was founded in 1961 by John's father, John Rediger Sr. and his friend R. D. Hildreth. John Sr. and R. D. operated the 340-acre ranch, while Rediger pursued his pharmacy career. Rediger and his father operated their pharmacy during the day and ranched during the evenings and weekends. John became a partner when Hildreth decided to retire from ranching. In 2009, Rediger took over sole operation of the ranch. Today, he runs more than 9,000 acres with one herd of Beefmaster cattle, while also working to phase out the ranch's commercial cattle herd.

Ranching and developing a quality high-performing beef herd continues to feed his passion. He and his father began raising Beefmaster cattle more than 45 years ago and never looked back. Rediger keeps detailed records on his purebred cattle. When selecting bulls and

heifers, he has a criterion of desirable traits he evaluates when purchasing his cattle. In other words – he buys the best of the best.

“You can’t go first-class on a second-class ticket. If I started out by buying cows in the middle, how long would it take me to get them to the top,” emphasized Rediger.

### **Stewardship - the only option**

Rediger knows that a rancher’s most important product is the quantity and quality of available forage. The cow is just the harvester. His mission is stewardship of the land. He has continued to pursue his stewardship goals by utilizing a rotational grazing system for his cattle, improving water distribution, building more cross-fencing, reducing brush encroachment, and enhancing wildlife habitat. This has also led to an influx of quail which had been in decline for many years. In turn, through successful improvement of his land and its management, Rediger is able to raise and market high-quality Beefmasters.

“I began improving my land and the land I lease by utilizing the NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) and their programs,” explained Rediger, “I began with a hundred acres of herbicide to control my mesquite and creosote brush. Then while walking through that pasture, I had the proof is in the pudding moment when side oats gramma showed up which I had never seen in this pasture - ever.”

A combination of herbicides is used to treat mesquite, creosote, and other undesirable brush species that can encroach on lands that have been historically overgrazed or unmanaged. Once these plants are eliminated or reduced, a stand of grass often returns naturally without having to reseed the area.

“I have now treated over 1,200 acres and you can see where you stopped spraying like drawing a line in the sand. But you still have to have your grazing management in place including rotating your herd, but also go back and spray by hand to keep the pastures waist high in grass and the brush out,” he said.

“Learning to have the right stocking rate was the hardest thing to learn. I now run one cow per 200 acres where historically others run one cow to 80 acres. You must know and see what kind of grasses you are growing, and not be afraid to move the cattle when needed. You can’t graze by a calendar.”

Utilizing the “take half leave half” grazing method, he monitors his grazing of key grass species to approximately 6 inches in height based on the recommendation of the NRCS when developing a grazing plan.

“Rotational grazing, spraying herbicide and adjusting to the correct stocking rate made sense after witnessing how my land and cattle responded to my new management. There is nothing better than looking over my cattle while riding my horse belly high in grass,” Rediger reflected.

### **Finding management success in rough dry country**

Most days Rediger begins by saddling up and going for a ride to check cows, fences, and water troughs. His largest and most rewarding responsibility is watching his land respond to grazing.

“Today I own and lease some of the roughest and driest areas in Texas. Many of these places didn’t have any water developed, fencing to help me keep the cattle in the proper pastures, and overall had been abused. So, I had to build it and improve it through sweat, blisters, and blood. We are always trying to do what is best for the land.”

Rediger has installed more than 26,000 feet of livestock pipeline, 50,000 feet of interior fencing to improve grazing distribution and rotation. He is working to restore more than 37 acres of riparian area located on the Pecos River watershed by fencing off access to the river and stream from his cattle. This conservation practices also enhances wildlife habitat and improves the water quality in those riparian areas. He also built six earthen stock water ponds for wildlife and livestock in areas where water wasn’t readily available.

In order to fight drought and the lack of forage, Rediger was planted an improved Giant “Cowboy” bermudagrass to an area where he is able to irrigate to allow the cattle to have green leafy forage packed with high protein, so his cattle continue to reach desired gains while reducing grazing pressure native pastures.

### **Building an oasis for birds and pollinators**

Rediger has always put his own sweat equity into his pastures, but also his ranching headquarters.

Located on the eastern edge of the Chihuahuan Desert, the ranching headquarters has been transformed from just a ranch house and outbuildings into a native garden filled with shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers including a little manmade stream to give sanctuary to insects, birds, and other wildlife including a covey or two of quail. From colorful lantana, Turk’s cap, desert willow, tall oaks, and many more, this garden changes from the desert to an oasis. Rediger is proud of his garden that he has turned into his own area for relaxing and enjoying all the wildlife buzzing around.

“One of my favorite things I enjoy the most about getting away and going to the ranch is to sit on my porch and either drink my coffee in the morning or a cold beverage in the evening and just watch the hummingbirds, the bees, my scaled and bobwhite quail broods and anything else that enjoys my pollinator garden.”

Today, Rediger can see the tall grasses, hear the calls of the blue quail whistling in the distance, see the life around the Pecos River, and smell the rain when a storm comes to relieve the desert allowing the flowers to bloom.

### **Captions:**

Breakfast: Two purebred Beefmaster cattle enjoy the fresh, green, protein filled giant bermudagrass as they begin their day grazing improved irrigated pasture in the hot dry weather of the summer.

An Oasis: Although the stream is manmade, the ranching headquarters has turned into a bastion for wildlife with stream water, native plants, trees, and shrubs transforming the desert into an oasis full of life.

Gate: Rediger stands at his gate on a cool winter morning as the morning light begins to creep over the horizon to begin his day of checking water, fences, and cattle.

Ebony and John: District Conservationist Ebony Benton discusses the next area to spray after seeing the tall grasses return to the pasture that used to be barren with only creosote bush as cover and very little wildlife.

Beefmaster: Beefmaster cattle are a breed developed in Texas in 1908 and recognized for their blend of strong maternal instincts, excellent growth and high-quality carcass traits that fit well in West Texas's dry and hot landscape.

Scoping his herd: Rediger walks among the herd to check for injuries, calves, and overall health of his cattle by assessing their overall body condition.

Pollination: This large bumble bee feeds on the nectar from a flowering Turk's cap which is a desirable food plant for many pollinating insects, bats, and hummingbirds.

Taking notes: Keeping proper records is required for running registered cattle. Having gentle cattle is also a desirable trait that helps him easily inspect for injuries, ear tag numbers, and overall body condition to ensure his herd is moving in a positive direction.

Waste High Grass: This area was sprayed a few years ago to remove creosote bush and mesquite allowing the native grasses such as Alkali Sacaton, bluestems, and muhlies to return.

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