To Brett Nix of rural Murdo, SD, sustainability is not enough. The progressive rancher believes rebuilding and regenerating the land is crucial in order for his family’s operation to be relevant for the next generations.

“My dad [Richard] served 45 years on the Jones County Conservation District Board,” Nix said. “He is progressive and listens well. He was open to no-till when we introduced it in 1994, and his willingness to help us go an entirely new direction back in 2007 was pivotal. Between my parents and my wife Lori, I’m really fortunate to have the support necessary to transform our family’s ranch for the long-term.”

Brett & Lori Nix work each day to create a sustainable family business and credit the Ranching For Profit school and their local NRCS team as catalysts for successful changes in their operation.

In 2007, Nix and his family worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on a comprehensive evaluation of the family’s farming and ranching operation.
profiles in soil health

The exhaustive conservation planning process was a turning point for the family; however, the real tipping point came nearly six years ago.

“We were calving. My son Christopher was helping as usual, and as I watched him carrying calves through less than ideal winter calving weather, I couldn’t help but wonder why the heck any one would choose to do this. Neither of us had much for quality of life” Nix said.

The next morning, Nix began taking steps that led to a revolution for the West River ranching family. After candid conversations with his father, Nix realized much of the family’s business model was rooted in traditional thinking.

“We calved in crappy winter weather because we thought we had to have calves a certain size and be done calving before it was time to get in the field,” Nix said. “It was all working from a narrow perspective, but when we looked at the big picture, we weren’t actually getting ahead. We were working terrible hours in terrible conditions and had no time for what really matters—our family.”

Nix believes in continued education and is an avid reader. With his new focus, he began scouring books, magazines, conferences and the Internet for information. In the process, he and his family partnered with the local NRCS, FSA, Farm Credit and US Fish & Wildlife offices. He participated in the Ranching for Profit school, and with a big picture plan, Nix moved the family away from cash crop farming.

“Once we stepped back and put all our focus on improving our quality of life for the long-term regeneration of our land, decisions became obvious. We changed our calving date first thing!”

According to Ryan Willert, NRCS District Conservationist serving Jones County, the move to spring calving marked a revolution for the Nix operation.

“Brett’s calving now on May 25; instead of managing six herds, he can focus on one,” Willert said. “The new calving date was the nucleus for change. Cows calve on green grass. Pastures have a solid 30 days to grow. His management changes have made impressive differences in what his operation is capable of producing.”
Quality Production

Partnership with the NRCS has been an important part of the rancher’s long-term strategy. A conservation plan, technical consultations and some financial help have helped make water, fencing and cover crop improvements possible. Those improvements allow Nix to manage an intensive grazing program while developing his herd with the ideal commercial cow for natural beef production in mind.

“We sold trucks, a combine, a tractor, sprayer and more in order to fund our transition,” Nix said. “With help from NRCS, we’ve been able to enhance our ranch and really focus on increasing our efficiency while maintaining quality production. Doing all that means we’ve also improved the overall quality of our family life.”

Nix manages the family’s ranch to ensure something is growing every day possible. A custom cover crop cocktail includes a blend of eight to 10 forages and legumes. Former farm ground has been re-seeded to a mix of native grasses.

“With our changes, we’re turning solar energy into cash through cattle,” Nix said. “Our drought plan has been a tremendous portion of all the planning we’ve done for the future. Because we’re in tune with what we want down the road, we’ve gone away from weaning and backgrounding calves. Now, calves are staying on the cows longer. We’re running yearlings, and we’re doing it all with greater success.”

For the Nix family, working with NRCS staff has been a critical key to their changes and successes.

“NRCS has been a great resource for us,” Nix said. “They’ve got technical assistance and programs that line up with our big picture, and that really encourages creativity. In the end, we want the land to be better than it was 100 years ago. Ensuring long-term viability for our family and our land is priority one.”

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