

Uncompahgre Farms— Community-Focused Grassfed Beef on Leased Land

BY ANN ADAMS

Uncompahgre Farms is owned and run by Caleb Valdez and Brittany Duffy. They raise grassfed cattle on leased land that Caleb has found throughout the Uncompahgre Valley in southwestern Colorado and started ranching in 2019 when he sold his first beef to family. With a total of 2,200 acres on 10 leases they have been able to grow their land base and their customer base through sound investments and hard work.

Pursuing a Passion

Caleb was born in rural New Mexico. “I grew up around livestock as my family trained horses and were farriers, and my brother worked on El Sueño Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico,” says Caleb. “This is where I first developed stockmanship skills. I competed in rodeo, showed steers, and played basketball in high school.” Caleb went to university and landed a job. “As the first in my family with a degree and a steady job with benefits, my parents were proud, but the work didn’t excite me,” says Caleb. After working on the Redding Hotshots he had enough saved to buy some cattle. “I suddenly found myself leading four cows and a bull away from sales on Craigslist, and me still with a fulltime job and not an acre to my name,” says Caleb. “For a landless start-up with my savings invested in the herd, I hoped to knit together a pasture rotation by leasing smaller fields owned by community members. Luckily I met Frieda, a spry 87-year-old who’d worked cows, horses, and land all her life, and she took a gamble on me. Her encouragement kept me going, and our community-based pasture rotation grew to include land leased from ten other community members. Just as the herd is growing, so is the Uncompahgre Farms community, and I’m incredibly grateful for the continued support.”

Brittany has worked as a high school teacher and for the U.S. Forest Service. “I worked for Forest Service for 6 years,” says Brittany. “I’ve always enjoyed the outdoors and wanted to help with the environment. In the USFS, I worked on community involvement in master planning and environmental analysis and while I enjoyed the work sometimes politics at a much higher level muddled the waters and I was losing the clear purpose I’d started with.”

Caleb first learned about Holistic Management through Allan Savory’s TED talk. “One of the biggest things I latched on to was desertification,” says Caleb. “In removing a grazing animal you can alter the whole system. When people tinker too much with our ecosystems things break down. The pictures he shared during that talk showed how these places changed over time because of good management.” Caleb also learned from Greg Judy that you don’t need to purchase land which got him thinking about leases.



Caleb and Brittany run an intern program to share their experience and knowledge with the next generation of agricultural producers.

As part of their ongoing learning, Caleb and Brittany took HMI’s Holistic Management course taught by Cindy Dvergsten in collaboration with the Valley Food Partnership as part of their Beginning Farmer/Rancher Grant from the USDA. This program has helped them look at a number of areas they hadn’t been focusing on.

“A lot of the course focused on the triple bottom line,” says Brittany. “The class helped us hone in on the financial side of things so we can stay viable. The people and land management side of things were clear to us about why we are doing it. But the financial side of things is

another hat that we haven’t worn too much.” They also appreciated the focus on quality of life and mental health and how the management process is all encompassing.

“The weak link test was particularly helpful on where to expand and use our capital. Everyone has a finite amount of capital to invest. Now we are looking at anything we purchase and asking: ‘Is this necessary for the business and what is the return on investment?’ When we were getting started I would search on Facebook Marketplace or Craigslist. As you acquire things you start asking ‘Do I need this?’ It was great to have a class to be challenged on what needed to be expended and for what.”

Caleb notes that because they lease all their land and move their cows a lot, they were particularly focused on a portable corral system and whether or not they should buy one. “We eventually decided not to invest in one, but it was good to think through the pros and cons besides the cost and the process helped us

calculate time and labor which helped us make that decision,” says Caleb.

Currently, Caleb and Brittany have one summer lease for 2,220 acres and then another 7 leases from 5–40 acres where they often keep horses and bulls and winter the cows on. “All these leases take time to manage because we are irrigating and doing prescribed burns or working on the drainage,” says Brittany.

This kind of stewardship has helped Caleb get more leases. “We started leasing in 2019 when I met Frieda,” says Caleb. “Then I talked to her neighbors about some leases and it went from there. Once you are

in a neighborhood you can start talking with other people about their land. I didn’t go into this thinking I was going to be a full-time rancher. But then I found myself having so much work. Then in the summer of 2021, I got the lease for the 2,200 acres and then it was too much work to do full-time work and do the ranching so we made the leap.

More land meant more animals and by February 2021 they had gotten their direct marketing in place and were at three farmers markets. They also got their big lease and their first intern, so Caleb quit his job and started

ranching full-time. They then added another market in 2022 and have been working on their community relations, beef quality (e.g. marbling, dry aging to tenderize and better showcase flavor, etc.), and management of people, land, and time.



Demand for Uncompaghre Farms' cattle has built to the point where they are processing 4 head a month selling by the cut as well as various value-added products including dog food and dog treats.

With the mountain lease came a need for more adaptive management, given the rugged country. Caleb worked on determining cattle moves given the minimal infrastructure and worked to herd the cattle to various sections of each of the paddocks, working for more even utilization. "It's constant observation," says Caleb. "You can estimate you have X amount of grazing, but you have to look at cattle condition and what the grass looks like and make adjustments." They now own 80 head of cattle (a combination of retained heifers and purchased cattle) and custom graze another 40 cows.

The 2,200-acre lease was the result of Caleb calling someone he knew to ask about his neighbor's land. The acquaintance then led him to the owner of the 2,220-acre lease. Caleb then called him and used references from the other lessors he had been working with. The new potential lessor called those references and offered Caleb the lease. "I would knock on so many doors," says Caleb. "I got rejected a lot knocking on doors and asking about leases. I would drive around areas and look for places where there was forage and fencing or land that was neglected. I was trying to find any land.

"We're growing the herd as a cow/calf operation and it's a pretty motley crew of pairs, yearling steers, and first-time heifers. We've tightened up the breeding to 90 days. Whatever is open gets culled. I'm working on keeping

the cows four years or younger. They are a mix of Hereford and Angus. I'm looking at body condition, brisket and tailhead to judge when the animals are ready for processing. We have built enough of a customer base that we process about four animals a month.

"We are really fortunate to have Kinikin Meat Processing as our processor, and we are booked out a year in advance with them. They've been great to work with and doing customer cuts. They also do dog food for us and we use the bones, the tallow, and organ meat. They are USDA inspected which enables us to be able to sell by the cut, per Colorado

food handling requirements. We also have been working on value-added products such as dog treats and sliders.

"We started grilling sliders at the farmer's markets so that helps with improving the profit-margin on the burger (which is 50% of the beef). We work with a farm that makes goat cheese and a local bakery for the buns, and we use those on the sliders. It's fun to cook for people and see their immediate reaction. A lot of farmers and ranchers we talk to don't get an interaction with the customer or that positive feedback. We find that it's really important for us to have those interactions. It really is two different businesses—the beef business and the land/cattle business."

Caleb and the interns move the cattle on horseback, breaking up the property using the natural topography. As is usual in the Southwest, water is the main issue. They use polywire to keep the cattle in a certain area of the ranch and then augment with herding. "We got a nice even graze and everything got hit one time," says Caleb. "A lot of stuff reseeded and headed out and we are working on really utilizing the area we want them to graze. We have 3.5 miles of fence that need to be

maintained. We find if we can keep the cattle together we get better breed back.

"Now we are in our second year of leasing that property, we are learning the seasonality of the plants. We are working to make sure to not graze the same pastures in the same time of year. We know we are going to make mistakes, but we also have to try things too. We observe the results and adjust as needed.

"We also need to take into account the human factor. The owner is from another state and hasn't grazed cattle and he wants us to graze from May–August so we have to adjust to that schedule as well as consider factors such as weather and avoiding oak toxicity.

We know we need to adjust things so we aren't working ourselves to death or propping up our cows. We need to make sure they are supporting us and we aren't supporting them too much (Caleb only provides Redmond trace minerals and some winter hay for his cattle). My goal is to do such a good job for this land, then other properties will become available for lease. The more I can do fixing fence and building more fence and grazing well, the more I can grow the business."

For some of Caleb's leases he may do improvement of fencing and grazing management in exchange for the lease fee. For smaller properties, he might pay irrigation water or a flat fee per acre. "I've realized that



Caleb and interns herd cattle within the large pastures they lease to improve more even utilization.

our labor is worth so much more," says Caleb. "I am trying to help landowners understand the value of our time and help, while they also are greatly reducing their taxes due to agricultural exemption.

"We are changing the narrative about leasing and the lessee being of value. I might provide the hay for their horses for the lease. Land is expensive, but so is labor. Land could be a

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burden and leasing can be a way to reduce that burden and address ag exemption.

"I take photos of the property before and after we graze to share with landowner. They can see the plant heights and how much we are leaving and not overgrazing. The land we are managing is looking better than the National Forest on the same plateau. The owners saw the ranch at the beginning, and after doubling our numbers we still left a lot of forage. The landowners told us they are seeing more wildlife including elk on their game cameras. They are really happy with our grazing.

"We want to work with bigger acres going forward. My goal is to have summer mountain ground and bigger irrigated grounds for grazing in the winter. We want to do one cutting there and then use the stockpile to graze and allow that vegetation to be trampled back into the ground. But, it is hard to convince the landowners to do that."

Caleb and Brittany had three interns this summer. Caleb rode with Glenn Elzinga at Alderspring Ranch and knows him. They have a big internship program with 200 applications a year. Caleb asked Glenn to share their intern opportunity with those who didn't make it into Alderspring. Interns get a stipend at the end of the summer, housing, and food. The housing does not include running water or electricity, but Caleb and Brittany provide propane and jugs of water. "We try to find the balance of working them, but not too hard," says Caleb. "We are going to continue with the intern program. It's definitely worth the added work of managing people. I had a good time and it is neat to see people increasing their skills."

Brittany's previous work as a high school teacher means she also enjoys the intern program. "I think young people give so much back to mentors through their enthusiasm, motivation, and their wide-eyed cheerfulness," says Brittany. "We can use that as older adults and in turn it's really awesome to provide knowledge and experience. We had a welcome barbeque for them with our landowners and neighbors and those landowners were excited to see young people interested in farming."

"There are a lot of young people who

will work this hard, but they do need to see something about you on social media," adds Caleb. "You have to show what you are doing. These younger people are posting on social media as well and that is important to them. You have to let them do that." To that end, Caleb is in charge of the social media as well as the ranch and livestock while Brittany focuses on irrigation and the farmers' markets.

Connecting to the Consumer

With an already full plate, Caleb and Brittany also put on a huge event in October—the Cowpoke Palooza which includes Western music, Western artists, and day of farmer's market including arts and crafts in Montrose. "This event showcases agriculture and helps to raise money to purchase our own land or conservation easement," says Caleb. "The business would own land that is conserved for agriculture. The valley is really experiencing growth, and a lot of new folks are interested in open space and local food, but

and farm stories around the valley. You keep trying things and seeing what you are capable of, what you can do for the community, and what is rewarding spiritually and financially. It's been incredibly interesting."

Caleb and Brittany are really pleased to see what they were able to make happen this year. They acknowledge they invested a lot of capital in this venture with cashing in homes and retirement funds, but they see their investments paying off.

"I can't envision doing anything more rewarding than making your living with the land," says Caleb. "Animals and land are important, but if you can't market them you will go out of



Uncompahgre Farms' herd is a combination of Hereford and Red and Black Angus. Caleb has built his herd from 5-80 head in 3 years and has been able to quit his full-time job to become a full-time rancher.



The 2,200-acre lease in the mountains is rough country that requires a combination of horseback herding and polywire to keep cattle where they need to be for even utilization and enough recovery for the plants.

a lot of the green space is being subdivided including some of the land they are leasing which endangers our leases. It would be awesome to be part of a long-term sustainable food supply. Winter pasture is definitely a bottle neck for us as we don't know how many cows we can support if those fields are for sale. Our first priority would be to have winter pasture for the cattle."

The Cowpoke Palooza is also about sharing our story," adds Brittany. "How many farms put on music to bring together hundreds of people celebrating agriculture? But, it is a huge ordeal and a big experiment. Next year we'll add a film festival as well, showcasing the epic agriculture

business. Working on all these pieces never gets old and we are always learning something."

"I have had a lot of jobs," say Brittany. "I feel 100% certain about what we've chosen to do and there is no confusion about being in this business or what am I doing every day. I don't feel conflicted about any of it. We are doing a good thing. We provide a good product, do good by the land, and bring people together."

"You've got to put yourself out there to engage people," adds Caleb. "It's not just luck. You've got to follow through and provide references and make things happen. I'm intimately aware of how much polywire fence I have to build, and that these ecosystem improvements will be measured not in days, but in years. This will be a challenging lifelong task, but I know I'm in good company—so many ranchers are working just as hard—to do right. Uncompahgre Farms is just a small operation, and I know I can't save the world on my own, but I'm just happy to be doing my part, one cow, one customer, one field at a time!" 🌱