

Fayette County rancher helps community, environment

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For many hungry families in Fayette County, the beef they received from the food bank or their church was a result of a Fayette County rancher's big heart for charity and conservation.

David Brooks, who owns the DDV Ranch, between La Grange and Schulenburg, with his wife, Darlene and daughter, Victoria "Tori," donated more than 23 head of cattle or more than 7,000 pounds of beef to feed needy families this summer and help with his conservation work on the ranch.

Brooks has been working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) to improve the ranch through conservation planning since 2005, when he bought the original family land that his wife's grandparents once owned. He raises Longhorn cattle and hay on the 72 acres. Brooks, who has lived in Houston since he was five, has seen the city grow up around him and lose its rural flavor. He was excited when the opportunity presented itself to start ranching. The family splits their time between Houston and the ranch.

"The place was overgrown with

weeds and needed a lot of work and for someone with a background in economics and health care, I knew I would need some help to get the land back in shape," said Brooks. "Working with NRCS staff, they were able to share their knowledge, skills and tools with me—someone without an agricultural background—on how to take the land from where it was to where I wanted it."

Just like other ranchers throughout Texas, Brooks was seeing the drought take its toll on available forage and water. So he visited with Glen Minzenmeyer with NRCS and Milton Koenning with the Fayette Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to see what would be the best option for his land and cattle.

"We had already worked with David to develop a conservation plan that included rotational grazing, cross-fencing, nutrient and pest management, along with a pond so he would have water for his different pastures," said Minzenmeyer. "With no end in sight for drought and to protect stunting future forage growth, we recommended decreasing his herd size."

With hay prices skyrocketing and auction barns overloaded with cattle

for sale, Brooks wasn't for sure what to do at first when it was recommended he destock. When Minzenmeyer mentioned donating the cattle to food banks and church food pantries, Brooks jumped on it.

"The love of the land and my love of helping others made it the perfect solution," said Brooks. "I have been ac-

tive in helping people most of my life, from mission work in Cuba to serving on the mission board at church helps in disaster response."

"My family and I have been blessed and so through this effort, I knew that I was not only going to help feed people who needed food, but it would also help my land and the environ-



NRCS Civil Engineering technician Glen Minzenmeyer and Fayette County SWCD technician Milton Koenning visit with David Brooks about his conservation plan for continuing improvements on the ranch.

ment by not continuing to overgraze," said Brooks. "Working with NRCS is like working with a good neighbor who is watching out for your best interests."

Each summer, the USDA-NRCS participates in the annual federal food drive called, "Feds Feeding Families" program and as a result of NRCS working with Brooks on the cattle donation, his 7,000 pounds of donated beef went toward the USDA's goal of raising more than 1,791,393 pounds of food.

"At the beginning of the summer, USDA set a department-wide goal of

contributing 500,000 pounds of food to the overall federal government goal of 2 million pounds," said Salvador Salinas, NRCS state conservationist for Texas. "In the end, the generous donations of USDA employees and our customers, such as Mr. Brooks and others throughout Texas and the U.S., helped USDA exceed their goal and the overall federal goal by raising a total of 5.97 million pounds of food."

Brooks' long term goals include acquiring more of his wife's family land along Hwy. 77 to make improvements and retiring one day to the family homestead.