

Rick Miller - Oasis Ranch, Grasmere

By Tracey Fredrickson



3 generations of the Miller family out for a ride including farm steward, Rick Miller, centre. The whole family helps move some 250 cattle on their 15,000 acre range tenure.

Kootenay farm operators have access to more resources than ever to help manage and grow their farms. Over the last few years, new programs and services providing technical expertise, business management advisement and educational programs for farmers have become available through Columbia Basin Trust, regional districts, Young Agrarians and the BC and federal governments at low or no cost. One of many farmers taking advantage of these resources is Rick Miller of Oasis Ranch in Grasmere, who is fast tracking a new era of farming on the land his grandfather homesteaded through such support.

Tucked away in the southeastern corner of the Kootenays, Grasmere is home to a number of farmers who are mainly producing hay. In the mid-60s, Rick's grandfather, Bill and his wife Mikki moved from Washington state to Grasmere and acquired 340 acres through a homestead grant. They used the land mainly for grazing quarter horses, growing hay and raising cattle. "It was more a lifestyle move for my grandparents," Rick says, "but my memory is of growing up on a farm!"

Oasis Ranch continues to be a family affair and Bill and his wife still live there. Rick and his mother, Yvonne are farriers and work two days a week off farm. At the same time Rick is pursuing his goal of revitalizing the property through holistic farm management and he and partner Emilie are building a house on the property where they will live full time.

When Rick learned about access to the mentorship program through the Young Agrarians, he was able to work with Blake Hall, herdsman for Prairie Gold Pastured Meats who also runs a unique herd share program which direct markets grass-finished beef and pastured pork into Red Deer and Calgary. Rick also worked with Young Agrarians founder Seann Dory as his financial mentor. He also secured a loan from Farm Credit Canada, financial support through the BC Breeders & Feeders Association, and protection against large yield losses through the federal AgriStability program.

At a presentation coordinated by the Kootenay Boundary Farm Advisors, Rick heard Alberta-based Steve Kenyon - described as a "rock star of the ranching world" - talk about sustainable farming methods. "Steve's talk made me realize I needed to do an intensive management grazing program," Rick says. He accessed help to develop the grazing program through the Young Agrarians' mentoring program, working with Blake Hall who practices the same sustainable approach to raising beef cattle. Rick also accessed valuable information through the Kootenay Boundary Farm Advisors on the scientific/technical side of farming. This included

working with KBFA Advisor Mike Malmberg whose expertise includes forage crop production, beef cattle production, farm business management and rangeland management.

With three generations still living on onsite after nearly six decades, Oasis Ranch has expanded to 15,000 acres of range tenure which is mostly used for grazing. “What we inherited was land which we lease, a barn and my old folks,” Rick says, “but we had no plan. This year we’re focussed on regenerating the soil and growing grass with a commitment to every activity being both profitable, sustainable and holistic.

“I’ve learned that if you’re willing to reinvent yourself to align with modern practices and market demand, there are many programs and services out there to support agriculture.”