

First Stewardship Support project completed

Custom feedlot is a new enterprise for Mrnak family



Brent Mrnak

When Brent Mrnak graduated from North Dakota State University last winter, he knew exactly where he was going to put his commodity broker degree to work – on his family ranch and newly developed commercial feedlot south of Bowman.

The Mrnak family – beginning

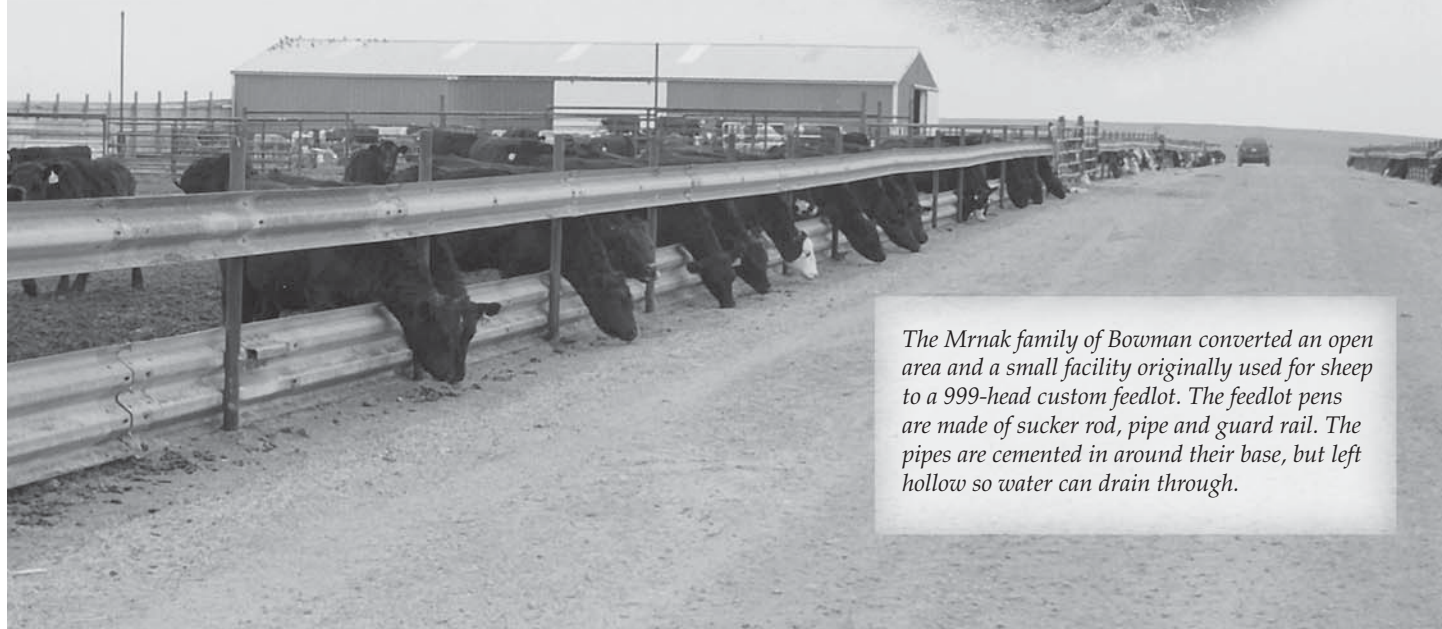
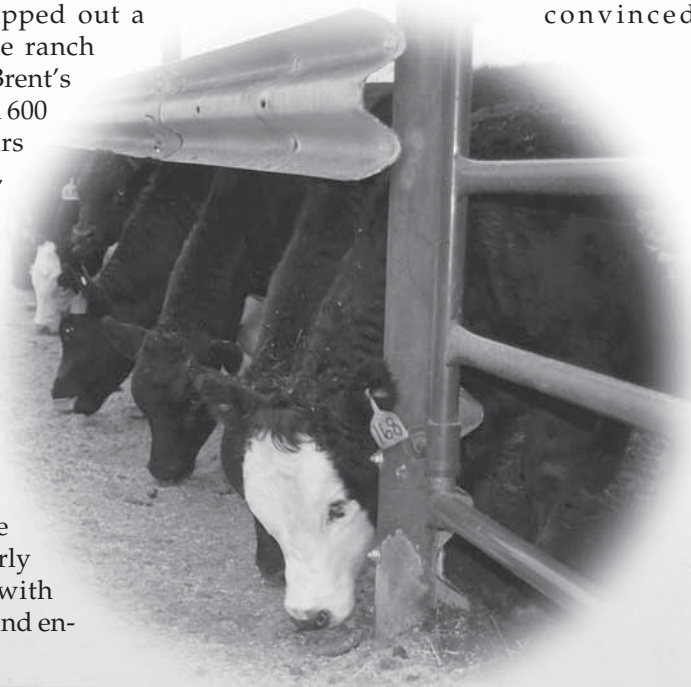
with Brent's grandparents, Jim and Marlene, and continuing today with his parents, Terry and Debby, and uncle and aunt, Wayne and Jill – has operated a diversified farm and ranch there for 50-plus years. With Brent's return to the operation and his interest in commodity marketing and livestock feeding, the family decided to launch the new enterprise. "Instead of buying more land and expanding that way, it seemed to make more sense to put that money into this one investment," Brent explained. "The feedlot is my project, but everyone is involved."

The family mapped out a spot northeast of the ranch headquarters where Brent's mom, Debby, had run 600 ewes for several years and where two barns, an indoor hydraulic chute and alley and a few preliminary corrals were already in place for the site of the new endeavor.

NDSA Environmental Services Director Scott Ressler got involved in the project during the early stages. He worked with Brent and his family and en-

gineers on the planning and development stages of the 999-head state-permitted lot, its S-shaped containment dike and clean water diversion system.

Brent said he learned in a hurry that developing a feedlot is not an overnight project. From the initial planning meeting to completion day, their project took an estimated 18 months to finish. "We'd walk around for hours and hours mapping things out and planning how this could work," he said. "Sometimes, the engineers had different ideas, and that was good. We all see things a little differently, and I'm convinced



The Mrnak family of Bowman converted an open area and a small facility originally used for sheep to a 999-head custom feedlot. The feedlot pens are made of sucker rod, pipe and guard rail. The pipes are cemented in around their base, but left hollow so water can drain through.



Top: This photo shows what the area looked like before the feedlot was constructed, but after many of the posts had been placed. Upper left: Mrnak's feedlot is designed with clean and dirty water diversion systems. In this photo, the ditch which carries the dirty runoff is shown. Left: This photo shows the diversion ditch that carries the clean water. Upper right: Mrnak's feedlot is the state's first permitted lot with a water-spreading system instead of a holding pond. Here, the five-tier S-shaped dike can be depicted by the newly seeded grass on the tier ridges.

that's how we arrived at the best plan for our situation."

The Mrnak project is special for a couple of reasons – it is the first one completed through the Stockmen's Stewardship Support Program, the association-run cost-share assistance program, and the first state-permitted lot utilizing a water-spreading system instead of a holding pond.

"The traditional thinking by regulators that holding ponds are the only alternative for livestock-feeding animal-waste systems is starting to change," said Ressler. "In this case, and in many cases, it makes much more economic and environmental sense to use a water-spreading system, where the feedlot runoff is separated from the clean water and spread across acres of vegetation, instead of just digging a hole." The soil is tested before and after a water-spreading system is put in place to monitor its nutrient levels and determine whether or not the system is a viable option for the location.

The NDSA has been promoting the use of water-spreading systems, like

SSP helps make dreams reality

Mrnaks credit the Stockmen's Stewardship Support Program in helping make their dream of a custom feedlot a reality. "If it wasn't for the cost-share support, it would have taken a long time to ever turn a profit on feeding cattle," Brent Mrnak said. "We wanted to design a system that was relatively maintenance-free. Through the Stockmen's Stewardship Support Program, we were able to do it right the first time."

on the Mrnak Ranch, and other "alternative technologies" to producers and Environmental Protection Agency and North Dakota Department of Health regulators for several years.

Mrnaks' feedlot is complete with pens on two sides of a 32-foot hard-packed-gravel alley, which is a viable

option in southwestern North Dakota, where excess moisture and high water tables are not a problem. It took a lot of dirt moving to achieve the desired depth, Brent said. In fact, there's 12 feet of fill in the alley alone. The family reduced some of their out-of-pocket cost by hauling much of the gravel and welding all of the sucker rod, pipe and guard rail feedlot fence themselves.

Cattle reach through a 15-inch space between guard rails to eat off the ground in the alley, instead of in bunks. They realize this system creates more waste in terms of feed, Terry said, but the cost is easily offset by the money they saved by not purchasing and installing the other alternative, concrete bunks. The only thing Terry wishes they would have done differently is widen the alley so there was enough room to turn around with the tractor and feed wagon without having to drive all the way to the end of it.

Each of Mrnaks' pens has one mound to help keep it clean and dry and a large 380- or 480-gallon water tank. Keeping good, clean water avail-

able to the cattle is a big part of keeping them healthy and gaining properly, so two wells and a rural water hookup are available for the feedlot in the event they need them, Terry said.

The family's goal is to raise all of the feedstuffs – corn, barley, screenings etc. – needed to sustain the nearly 4,000 head of feedlot cattle they will turn per year. With extreme drought conditions in 2004, that didn't happen in the feedlot's inaugural year, but they are hopeful for 2005. In order to meet the new demand from the feedlot enter-

prise, Terry said many of their traditional cash-crop wheat acres will be converted for corn. He anticipates planting 1,000-plus acres this spring. Consulting nutritionists help Mrnaks make their ration decisions.

The feed supply will help them offer backgrounding, finishing and even heifer development services to commercial customers. The latter is something Brent is particularly excited about. "We could use some of the bigger lots and use them on grass so they get some exercise, develop and even AI-breed

them," he said. "We have had excellent conception rates on our own heifers – 70 percent bred AI last year – and are confident we could do the same for our customers." If that project goes farther, a grass site immediately north of the existing feedlot could be an expansion option, he said.

Backgrounding calves will be the lot's mainstay for now, however, Brent said. Their customers are responsible for their calves' marketing, but Mrnaks help in whatever way they can. Those that have been grown in the Mrnak lot so far have been sold via a variety of outlets, such as St. Onge Livestock and video auctions.

Mrnaks are also using the new feedlot to custom feed and finish or even purchase some of their bull customers' calves, a practice they began on a small scale nearly six years ago. This has been a good customer service practice and a good way to collect carcass data on the progeny of certain sires and determine which bloodlines are best at producing the kind of product consumers demand, Brent said.

Diligent recordkeeping on individual animals' health and feeding performance help Mrnaks make those determinations and give their customers the best picture of their cattle's performance while they are in Mrnaks' care.

"It's neat to be out here at feeding time and see 999 noses sticking out and eating," Brent said. "It was hard to envision this all becoming a reality when all there was out here was a bunch of dirt and a couple of buildings, but it came together and it will be fun to see develop."

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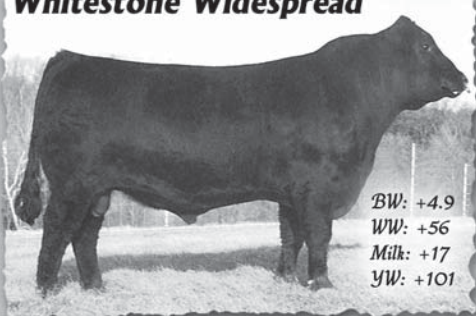


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The Last Roundup

*They say there will be a great roundup
Where cowboys, like cattle will stand
To be cut by Riders of Judgement
Who are posted and know every brand.*

The NDSA extends its deepest sympathy to the family and friends of the following members and friends who have passed on.

Tim S. Dwyer, Sidney, Mont.
Joe Laaveg, Park River
Tristan Long, Berlin