

FEATURED FARM

Star B Ranch and Hop Farm

WRITTEN BY CASEY ANDERSON

BUFFALOS AND BREW



If you're looking for proof that farmers are innovators, look no further than Star B Buffalo Ranch and Hop Farm. Ken Childs and his son-in-law, Eric March, and their families have found success on their Ramona ranch growing and selling products that few others can: grass-fed buffalo and hops.

The Star B Ranch and Hop Farm started in 1979 when the Boeckmann family acquired

1,050 acres in east Ramona and challenged daughter Denise and her husband, Ken Childs, with creating a business to offset the ranch's operating costs. Neither had any agricultural background, but they did have a passion for the land and the smarts to recognize an opportunity when they saw it. Says Ken, "We had the land, we've got plenty of water (so far), and we're located in Southern California. All we needed was an idea that

could take advantage of what we had. Although we had a lot to learn about raising and containing buffalo we also had little experience in the highly competitive meat industry. But we believed that the history of the American Bison and the low fat qualities of the meat offered us an opportunity to build a business."

Indeed it did. Today the Star B Ranch is one of the best known producers of both high quality bison breeding stock and bison meat in the nation, with an average year round herd of about 30 animals. Within eight years of bringing the first buffalo to the ranch, Star B won a National Grand Champion trophy for a two year old bull, and were the first bison producer to place a one pound package of USDA inspected ground bison in a Southern California supermarket chain. Ken became President of the American Buffalo Association and Founder and Past President of the Western Bison Association. "Opportunity drove us to become bigger and better," explains Ken.

Today, the ranch is feeling the effects of the drought with little grass growing in the pastures, and Ken works to



manage additional feeds costs to the bison. He found Fodder Solutions, a feed container that grows barley from seed to grass in six days, and can produce 42 seventeen pound fodder "biscuits" per day. "We feed a 17 pound fodder to each animal and then they go out and graze. The fodder and natural grazing is a great combination that can add weight gain for my growing calves and good milk production for my buffalo cows," says Ken. Even with the costs of the barley seed, water, and power required for the unit, the fodder costs are still just 50% of current hay prices.

In 2008, Ken and his son-in-law, Eric March, saw an opportunity in hops. With the burgeoning craft brewing scene in San Diego, Ken and Eric looked at what they had and saw a market. One of the four ingredients in beer production, hop cones lend the bitter flavor and floral aromas to beer. The cones grow on vines trained vertically and each vine can produce anywhere from two to six pounds of hop cones.

Ken and Eric decided first to try their hand growing hops on a small scale, but today they are the largest hops grower in the county with two acres planted and 3,000 vines in the ground. 3,000 mature vines could optimally yield over 12,000 pounds of wet hops. Sold at \$15 per pound to home brewers and \$10/lb wholesale to local craft breweries, that's starting to look like more than hobby money, but Ken admits in the past it hasn't penciled out.

"The problem is the difficulty of harvest. It's just extremely labor intensive and there wasn't enough margin to hire the people. We struggled with that. We were either going to give up, or step up."

They stepped up, and earlier this year purchased a refurbished Wolf hop harvester from a company in Northern California.

"What it does it gives us the ability to expand," says Ken. "Operating two acres, we were struggling just trying to harvest everything in the window we have. The ripeness of the hops and harvest is a short window, about two weeks. Optimally you want to harvest in one week. This machine will give us ability to harvest two acres in two days."

But being able to grow the cones and get the harvest in doesn't get the product sold. Eric worked to establish relationships with local brewers and today Star B's hops have been featured in beers from many popular breweries including San Diego

Brewing Co., and Ballast Point Brewing Co. Ken and Eric haven't stopped at getting their own hops sold. "Eric and I decided that in an effort to maintain a leadership role as a hop farm in Southern California it would be a good idea to contact other hop growers and form a hop alliance or association, to come together to share ideas, information, and marketing and promotional opportunities," says Ken. The first meeting was held



November 15th at Valley Center Brewery and about 15 interested farmers showed up.

Star B Ranch and Hop Farm has become a leader in the bison industry and as a hop grower with effort, no small amount of innovation, and by producing a quality product. Says Ken of the road he and his wife Denise and their families have taken, "This all takes a lot of work and sacrifice to build your business and take advantage of opportunities when you see them. For two Southern California baby boomers with no agricultural experience I think we've done pretty good." ■