

High Beef Prices Fueling A Rustling Revival In Plains States

BY MICHAEL GRACZYK
Associated Press

GIDDINGS, Texas — Doug Hutchison wears a badge and carries a gun but his most effective weapon in the pursuit of livestock thieves in the nation's largest cattle-producing territory may be his smartphone.

With it, Hutchison, one of 30 Special Rangers with the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, photographs suspected stolen livestock, accesses the association's databases of livestock brands and reports of missing animals and consults with sheriff's offices.

"I think it's one of the greatest tools in the world," said Hutchison, wearing a cowboy hat and jeans, his boots mired in the mud and manure of noisy auction stockyard corrals filled with nervous cattle.

Cattle prices have been at record levels, and reports of missing or stolen cattle have followed. The nearly 5,800 livestock reported as such in Texas in 2014 was the most in five years, and the value of the animals — in excess of \$5.7 million — the most in a decade.

"Any time you see the price of any commodity go up, you see the theft of that commodity rise," says Larry Gray, executive director of law enforcement for the association founded in 1877.

There were nearly 90 million head of cattle and calves in the U.S. at the beginning of 2015, the fewest in some six decades. Texas, where drought forced ranchers to trim herds, had just under 12 million, nearly double the next largest beef-producing states of Nebraska and Kansas.

The Special Rangers cover 76 million

acres in Texas and Oklahoma. Through July this year, they've worked nearly 400 theft cases; they did nearly 800 in 2014. In one case last month, a Texas man was charged with theft after 544 steers worth nearly \$800,000 went missing. The Kansas Attorney General's Office has 20 open investigations.

Stealing livestock — a felony — isn't new. Records show the first person imprisoned at the still-unfinished Texas State Penitentiary in 1849 was a horse thief. The 21st-century rustler is more likely to be in a pickup truck, pulling a trailer.

Bruce Koger lost 14 head of cattle worth about \$25,000 last month when someone cut a lock at his small ranching operation in Brazoria County, just south of Houston.

"It really takes the wind out of your sails," he said. "It's all I can think about. I want the rustlers more now than even the cattle back."

Hutchison investigates cases in nine central Texas counties, smartphone in hand.

"We can check statewide," he said. "But characteristically, a lot of (offenders) don't travel more than 100 miles. Those thieves are too lazy to work."

Three animals attracted his attention recently at an auction in Giddings, midway between Houston and Austin. The seller wasn't local, and one of the cows was pregnant. "That's very unusual," Hutchison said.

He sent photos of the cattle, which carried no brands or ear notches, to the association and contacted sheriff's offices. Some states mandate branding, but Texas doesn't.

"If it (cattle) ain't marked, you can get away with it," says 44-year-old lifelong

cowboy John Green, of Klondike. "That's the trick."

Green was trying to pay a bail bondsman from a previous theft case when he was nabbed last fall in northeast Texas. "I was sitting on a load of cattle on a trailer," he said from a prison where he's serving 10 years.

Hutchison says a lot of rustling is related to illegal drug use; Kansas and Nebraska investigators said the same. "Because the price is so high, some of these think: 'If I can get four or five head, I can stay high for a long time,'" he said.

And rustling almost always involves people with an agriculture background.

"There's not a facet of the cattle business I don't know," said Carl Curry, 48, a Texas A&M University animal science graduate who has 119 years left in prison. Prosecutors said he stole more than 2,000 cattle since 2007; Curry insists he'll be vindicated on appeal.

Some rustling cases end well. According to Gray, marked or branded cattle have "about an 80 to 85 percent chance of recovery," while unbranded animals go "way, way down, maybe 35, 40 percent."

The Special Rangers returned 21 calves to Brazoria County rancher Tim Wieghat a few years ago and got him restitution. "It was awesome," Wieghat said.

But in July, someone cut locks on a pasture and stole some equipment, a crime the Special Rangers also investigate.

"We're able to live a good life because of these cow prices," he said. "You push yourself to give your family more, and then they come along and just take it. ... It gets to the point you're fed up."

Neb. Families May Launch Medical Pot Ballot Initiative

BY GRANT SCHULTE
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — Families that want to legalize medical marijuana are raising money and lining up donors for a possible 2016 ballot drive, even though Nebraska lawmakers say they'll address the issue next session.

Parents with sick children who lobbied for a measure that stalled this year have formed a new nonprofit, Nebraska Families 4 Medical Cannabis, to explore a citizen-led petition drive.

Though the group won't announce its decision until next month when members have a firm plan in place, president Shelley Gillen said, she has already spoke with possible financiers and a GoFundMe page has so far received more than \$6,100 of the \$7,500 the group wants for the initial push.

"We are looking at some different options," said Gillen, of Bellevue. "We want to become more vocal and recognized as law-abiding citizens who want safe, legal access to medical cannabis."

If the ballot campaign proceeds, it would replace a low-budget petition drive that's already under way through Omaha's chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana

Laws. Chapter founder Bryan Boganowski said his group is approaching 20,000 signatures with an all-volunteer drive based primarily in Omaha, but it quickly became clear that deep-pocketed donors and paid workers are necessary.

"It comes down to money," Boganowski said. "Volunteers alone can't pull this off. It's going to take paid petition circulators."

Boganowski said his group would throw its support — and collected contact information — behind Nebraska Families 4 Medical Cannabis if the ballot campaign happens.

Gathering signatures for a ballot measure could be easier under a new state law that goes into effect Aug. 30. The law allows petition organizers to pay circulators by the signature instead of by the hour, something supporters say gives circulators an incentive to gather more and makes it easier for organizers to estimate how much a petition drive will cost.

Signature gathering could become easier still depending on the outcome of a federal court case, in which a federal judge struck down a requirement that petition signatures come from registered voters in at least 38 of Nebraska's 93 counties.



Backpack safety can prevent serious injuries

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates there are more than 7,300 backpack-related injuries per year. Children routinely carry more than the recommended weight in school backpacks and, compounding the problem, also carry their bags incorrectly.

A backpack that is too heavy may cause

- * red marks on the shoulders or back from the straps
- * tingling or numbness in the arms and back
- * changes in posture when wearing the backpack, and
- * pain anywhere in the back.

To compound these problems, which also may include nerve damage resulting from pressure on nerves in the shoulders, children should lighten their loads and carry backpacks correctly. The following tips are some additional ways youngsters can **prevent backpack-related injuries**.

- * Carry only necessary items. Children should only carry what is required for that particular school day in their backpacks. If teachers routinely have students carry home many heavy books, parents can consult with the teachers to see if there are other options.
- * Distribute weight evenly. Items in the backpack should be spread out to distribute the weight across the entire back. Heavier items should be at the bottom of the pack.
- * Use both straps. Using only one strap shifts the backpack weight to one side, causing the back and shoulders to strain. Many orthopedists have reported treating children with back or shoulder pain as the result of carrying back packs incorrectly.
- * Choose the correct backpack size. The size of the backpack should match the scale of the child and should rest evenly in the middle of the child's back.

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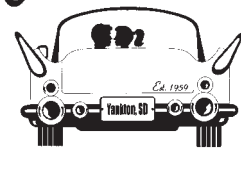
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