

BY MOLLY HENNESSY-FISKE  
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**T**he cowboys rose well before dawn, stars still high in the West Texas sky, strapped on spurs and leather chaps and climbed into their saddles for one last roundup.

They didn't have to do much to rustle the cattle from the dusty flats about 220 miles west of Dallas. Hundreds of hungry black Angus and Herefords, tired of foraging for scarce, drought-dry grass, came running — drawn by the hope of feed. The cowboys herded the youngest, thinnest and weakest animals into a separate pen, some with ribs and hipbones jutting after weeks without a decent meal.

The best cattle from Swenson Land & Cattle Co. Inc. will make the trip north.

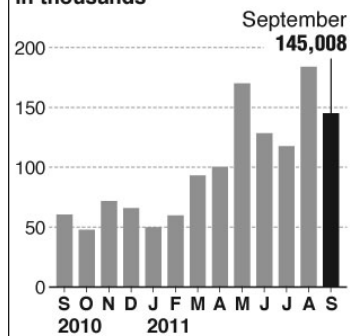
It's a journey born of desperation, a costly cattle drive fueled not by tradition or buyers at Midwest packing houses, but by the desire to survive the lengthening statewide drought.

Managers at Swenson and the state's other large ranches have been scrambling to ship cattle to verdant northern land they have leased in an effort to save their trademark brands and to continue taking advantage of the worldwide demand for beef.

## Roundup

Ranchers are sending cattle north to save them from the drought.

Cattle exported from Texas, in thousands



Source: Texas Animal Health Commission  
Graphic: Molly Hennessy-Fiske, Matt Moody, Los Angeles Times © 2011 MCT

By January, about 12 percent of Texas' roughly 5 million head of cattle will have disappeared since last year — shipped, slaughtered or sold, according to David Anderson, an economist with the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, an agriculture education agency based at Texas A&M University.

Swenson has paid about \$70,000 to ship 1,200 head — two-thirds of the herd — to Tryon, Neb., and Lusk, Wyo. They are all cows, the precious breeding stock they have cultivated since Swedish immigrants staked out the territory in the 1860s.

Swenson's double-deck trucks will trace some of the same routes followed by the 19th-century cattle drives up the Chisholm and Goodnight-Loving trails. Such massive drives would no longer be possible on hoof, the prairies long ago fenced in.

"There'd be no way to water cattle," Swenson General Manager Dennis Braden said from behind his gray cowboy hat and matching mustache. "These old cows are so weak, we'd go to killing them."

Braden stared out at the parched land from his downtown office, covered with portraits of past ranch managers, almost all in cowboys hats, many holding cigarettes and grinning during better times. "Between here and Kansas, there's no place to water cattle because we're droughted-out and the tanks are good and dry."

Swenson has sold 1,000 head of cattle this year and is struggling to maintain the remaining 500 cows, 100 bulls, and 1,300 calves.

# Northward Bound

## Texans Driving Cattle North Amid Drought



MOLLY HENNESSY-FISKE/LOS ANGELES TIMES/MCT

Monty Jones, from left, Stony Jones and Mark Voss round up cattle on a ranch owned by Swenson Land and Cattle Company near Stamford, Texas, on Sept. 30. With drought drying up grazing lands, cattle companies are rounding up herds and moving them to more verdant land in other states.

An August survey by Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association found 84 percent of ranchers had reduced their herds.

Ranchers would prefer to build their herds, given the national cow inventory is at 1950s levels, Braden said, while the national human population has more than doubled since then. Plus, U.S. ranches increasingly serve the world market. Texas, with the nation's largest cattle industry, provides 16 percent of America's beef. U.S. beef prices are expected to increase this year as much as 8 percent, twice the increase in overall food costs, according to the Department of Agriculture.

"For the first time in my life, we had a chance to make some real money," Braden said.

When word spread among Stamford's 3,052 inhabitants that Braden was sending cattle north, some worried that the livestock they were accustomed to seeing around town would disappear forever.

"Used to be, you would see horses and cattle by the bookoodles coming in. Now it's not," said Sandra Rhea, curator of Stamford's Cowboy Museum, full of faded rodeo snapshots. "They're all going up

north, and there's no telling when they're coming back."

Texas has suffered more than \$5.2 billion in agricultural losses this year from the dry spell, including the cattle industry. No relief is in sight and the state climatologist says this could be the start of a 10-year drought, part of changing weather patterns worldwide.

A few months ago, managers of Swenson and the larger spreads called a crisis meeting at Tongue River Ranch, about 95 miles north of here. They agreed to send Braden and the manager of the Four Sixes Ranch to scout northern pastures that had received above-average rainfall, and ended up leasing land in Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Montana.

Many say they plan to return at least some cows once Texas greens, but admit it could be years before the cows come home.

Smaller Texas ranches unable to lease land have been selling out, sending to slaughter calves and cows they cannot afford to feed.

At a recent auction in Lampasas, about 70 miles north of Austin, buyers for outfits in Colorado and Wyoming lined up to bid on skinny cows, bulls,

steers and calves. Many sold for \$1 a pound, down from \$1.70 last year.

A few cattle in the auction ring had cheeks studded with prickly pear cactus spines and legs sheathed in "white socks" of pale caliche mud — signs they had been searching for food on the range as hay and feed prices skyrocketed.

"We can't get hay — we're feeding them stuff you wouldn't feed a goat," said Bob Garner, 58, a rancher at the sale from nearby Goldthwaite, where hay prices have doubled and creeks have run dry.

At Swenson, local businessmen, from feed dealers to antibiotic salesmen, have stopped by to remind Braden they can ship goods to his herd up north. But he can't afford the added cost, which he knows will take a toll on the local economy. He has already been forced to thin his staff from 14 to nine since March.

One recent day, he watched his cowboys wrestle his cattle from the scrub. He hated to see the cattle like this, the calves worst of all.

Underfed and undersized, they were too small to make the journey. Cowboys swept in on horses and pried them away from their mothers. One tried to escape. The rest just huddled together on spindly legs, lowing.

Three double-decker trucks would arrive soon for the animals strong enough to make the journey. The cowboys would prod them up a chute and into the trucks, bound for Nebraska.

**"Used to be, you would see horses and cattle by the bookoodles coming in. Now it's not. They're all going up north, and there's no telling when they're coming back."**

SANDRA RHEA

# Chocolate Milk Serves Up A Needed School Lunch Debate

BY RITA BRHEL  
P&D Correspondent

Really, I get it, I do. Chocolate milk is a lot healthier than soft drinks — but still, does chocolate milk truly have a place in school lunches?

At least in my house, chocolate milk is considered a treat because, well, it has chocolate in it. If the kids want to drink something, I prefer that they choose the plain, ole white milk.

Recently, a California school board has received a request from parents to pull chocolate milk from the lunch menu. They charge that the added sugar in chocolate milk contributes to childhood obesity.

I think it's finally time that someone is cracking down on the health of school lunches. It's not like school lunches are as bad as going to a fast-food restaurant, but for whatever reason, I believe they should provide the best of the best nutrition available to children. Maybe it's be-

cause I try hard at every meal and snack to give my kids tasty, healthy food. Or that an increasing number of children in the United States don't get wholesome meals at home, whether it's because their parents don't care or — I hope it to be more likely — can't afford the price of good nutrition. We all know that the cheapest foods in the grocery store are not the healthiest, but with the economic issues of the past several years and parents' struggles to stay within their spending limits, sometimes all they can afford is those nutrient-lacking foods.

I guess, however, the dairy industry — as well as some nutritionists, which does surprise me a bit — is all up in arms over this parental request to remove chocolate milk from the lunch menu. The concern is that without chocolate milk in schools, milk consumption drops dramatically: around 37 percent. Obviously, that would be a concern for the dairy industry, although

really, should we put money ahead of health?

But what about the nutritionists, what's their reason for worry? They say that milk is a child's main food source for calcium, Vitamin D, and potassium, and that without the chocolate in it, kids won't drink it. For this reason, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Dietetic Association agree that the value of chocolate milk outweighs the added sugar. In fact, according to these groups, flavored milks account for only 3 percent of total added sugars in children's diets; the primary source is soft drinks.

The school board should



Rita BRHEL

honor the parents' request. Sure, fewer children will be choosing milk to drink — bummer for the dairy industry — but I don't think that offering chocolate milk just because kids would rather have the sugary milk as to the white milk is a good enough justification. It's akin to letting your child eat ice cream instead of drinking milk at supper, because at least he's getting milk's nutrition, no matter how much added sugar there is in the ice cream. And, yes, I know that chocolate milk is not the same as ice cream, but hopefully you get my point. The deeper issue here is the message

being sent to kids: that sugar has to be added to healthy foods in order to make them taste good. Sugar is addicting, especially for children, and if they eat sugar in and on everything, they lose appreciation for naturally sweet, but much healthier, food choices like fruit and, in this case, milk. Allowing chocolate milk because it tastes better doesn't help children learn to choose and eat healthy foods. It teaches them that flavor trumps nutrition, and if they haven't already, they'll be more tempted to graduate to more unhealthy food choices, like soft drinks, because well, it tastes better.

And wouldn't it be better for the dairy industry, in the long run, if we all focused more on nutritious eating — think generations of people choosing to drink

milk over soft drinks long into their adult years — rather than worry about the shorter term effects of removing chocolate milk from school lunches? For long-term sustainability of the dairy industry — meaning that the industry will be able to survive economically, without increasing government subsidies — producers and milk processors need to focus on the bigger picture: what changes in policy can be done to attract more people to choose dairy products now and in the future? Embracing a healthier take on food consumption, partnering with growers of fruits and vegetables and other unprocessed foods, will get the dairy industry farther in terms of long-range profitability than will arguing how chocolate milk is the lesser of the two evils.

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