“We have to be good stewards of the land,” Jason notes, “or we won’t have a business or a family tradition of ranching to pass on.”

Building family tradition on Environmental Stewardship

The McCann clan of Miller, Mo., front row from left, Rebekah Chute, Maggie and Christian McCann, and Caleb Chute. Back row from left are Mary Lou and Jason McCann, Linda and Jim McCann, and Hannah and Monica Chute.

This article originally appeared in Missouri Life Magazine.
The McCanns have implemented several practices on their Missouri ranch that are both environmentally friendly and economically motivated.

They practice an intensive, rotational grazing system of their perennial grass, mostly fescue. This rotational grazing keeps the grass blades cut, which spurs new growth, and the cows trample manure and decaying plants into the soil, which helps the soil retain water and microbes so the soil stays healthy. Research has shown that rotational grazing can actually reverse land degradation, turning dead soil into thriving grassland.

Also, all livestock are fenced away from ponds and creeks. "It prevents mastitis (an infection of the udders), foot rot, and weak calves from bogging down. The cattle are healthier, drinking clean water from our waterers. I could drink from our waterers," Jason says. And it keeps the cattle manure out of the water and on the grass, where it serves as a natural fertilizer, offering yet another economic benefit to their business.

They also use a GPS system for applying any herbicides to control broadleaf weeds only where needed and to ensure no over-application occurs, such as overlapping a strip of spray width. This is again environmentally sensitive because it cuts the amount used, but it’s also economical. “When you pay $5,000 for a 55-gallon barrel of herbicide, you don’t want to waste any.” Jason has qualified for his private applicator’s license, as required by law and to ensure his own family’s safety and health during application.

In addition, the McCanns have maintained 40 acres of big bluestem native prairie grass that was on the farm when they bought it. They have discovered it is worth its weight in gold during a drought, and one summer fed 71 cattle rotating on and off of it all summer, although it has a narrow window for its best nutritional value for the cattle. They do not put cattle on it after September 15, for example, while their fescue pastures are grazed throughout the fall.

On the Headquarters farm, the McCanns have also fenced out one acre for quail and turkey habitat, participating in an Environmental Quality Incentives Program operated by the United States Department of Agriculture.

The end result of these practices? A little better bottom line and a better beef product for the consumer, too. The McCanns have emerged as progressive Missouri beef producers since they first started here in 2004, and Jason now works only part-time with orthotics. Mary Lou works with Jason on the ranch and is the bookkeeper and works off as an accounting assistant during tax season.

Jason says, "We like the fact that here in Missouri we can own our own land." But the McCanns fear that the same activists that were against cattle ranching in Arizona are also making inroads into Missouri. "We are definitely concerned that people don't understand that we have a big incentive to be environmentally friendly. We have no reason or motive to treat the land or the cattle in a way that would be harmful to the family, the cattle, or the environment. We live here. We eat our own beef. We want to protect our land and our way of life, not just for us but for this future generation, too."

*Time* magazine agrees with the McCanns. In a January 2010 article, entitled "Save the Planet: Eat More Beef," *Time* postulates that "Environmentalists have been giving cows a bad rap in recent years. Between what bovines eat and what they excrete, cattle production emits a lot of greenhouse gas. But if fed solely grass, cows could play a key role in reversing climate change."

The reason grass plays a key role is this: Grass requires little besides sunlight and water to grow. Fertilizer and pesticides generally aren't needed. Cows on grass work manure and decaying matter into the soil, which helps keep the carbon dioxide (often called greenhouse gases) underground and out of the air. So compared with feedlot cattle, the "net" methane emissions are lower. In fact, some researchers hypothesize that just a 1 percent increase in soil carbon levels on existing agricultural, grazing, and desert lands throughout the world could be enough to capture the total equivalent of the world’s greenhouse-gas emissions, according to the *Time* article. That’s a lot of responsibility for a cow! Or other ruminants.

That said, most of Jim and Jason’s cattle are sold into feedlots, where they acquire the grain-fed taste and texture most consumers prefer. For the first time last year, the McCanns sold four freezer beefs directly to consumers, and they hope to sell more like that this year. But the decision to buy grass-fed beef lies with consumers, of course. “I much prefer the taste of grain-finished beef, too," Jason says.

It is the consumer that is ultimately the reason the McCanns do what they do. "We know we have to produce a consistent and highly desirable product. That’s how anyone stays in business," says Jason, as he looks at his two children, Christian and Maggie, just home from school. "We want to pass on what we know to them and maybe continue what has been a family tradition since the 1800s."

He looks out the window and sees the green grass growing and smiles.