

APACHE COWS GET THE ONCE-OVER

After securing the cow safely in the squeeze chute, Bob Racicot runs his hand over her side. "She's a '5'" he says. He moves around to her front to check her eyes, teeth, and feet—all score a No. 1. From the rear of the animal, Ed Bicknell calls out, "She's PG."

going to be productive and those that are not," Bicknell says. "You can't afford to keep those that are freeloaders. It gets back to the product—milk is not the product, the calf is the product."

A cow is considered functionally efficient if it returns 50 percent to 60 percent of its body weight every 12 months in the form of a calf. The evaluation technique Racicot and Bicknell use is based on a fundamental rule of nature—an animal must be in good physical condition to become pregnant. They rank a cow's body condition on a scale ranging from No. 1 to 10.

"We think a '5' is good condition for breeding," Bicknell says. "You can feel a slight fat cover between the skin and ribs."

The state of the animal's udder, teeth, eyes and feet is graded from 1 to 5, with a score of "1" indicating the best condition. The cow's age also is confirmed by counting her teeth. By performing a rectal palpation, Bicknell determines pregnancy based on the condition of the cow's uterus.

Once a representative sample of the herd has been evaluated, Racicot and Bicknell estimate the herd pregnancy rate and present their data to the stockman.

"These guys sure have helped us a lot," says Varnell Gatewood Sr., the North Fork Cattle Association stockman. "We knew our cattle were in good condition but not much else. It was good to find these guys. If they'd been here years ago, I wonder where we'd be today."

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This alpha-numeric discourse baffles the uninitiated, but it's music to the ears of the stockman standing nearby. The young cow is in prime physical condition and pregnant.

For the last three years, Racicot, director of the Navajo

County Cooperative Extension Office, and Bicknell, an Extension veterinary specialist based at the Maricopa Agricultural Center in Maricopa, have provided livestock evaluations to any of the 10 White Mountain Apache Tribe cattle associations that choose to participate.

The two don't preach, advise or sell products. They present their findings and answer questions—period. The herd management decisions are made by each association's stockman, or herd manager.

"What we're trying to help them do is identify the cows that are

Ear Tag #:	_____				Herd:	_____			
Date:	_____				Age:	_____			
		Good						Bad	
Udder	1	2	3	4	5				
Teeth	1	2	3	4	5				
Eyes	1	2	3	4	5				
Feet	1	2	3	4	5				
Pregnant:		YES						NO	
Body Condition:	_____								
Pelvic Measurements:	_____								
Other comments:	_____								

Opposite page: (Top) North Fork cowboys separate the cows to be evaluated from the calves and bulls. **(Bottom left)** A not-so-sure cow is ushered into Racicot's squeeze chute. **(Bottom right)** Racicot evaluates the cow's physical condition while Bicknell (inside chute) determines if the cow is pregnant.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAN McCOY



Gatewood speaks wistfully, for today, the White Mountain Apache cattle industry is struggling.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Gatewood says, the cattle industry was foremost in the economy of the tribe. But a successful lumber operation and ski resort in McNary have taken over that position.

The cattle associations were organized about 30 years ago when the tribe decided to produce its own beef instead of depending on federal sources for meat. Each self-supporting association is made up of individual owners whose cattle make up one herd. The North Fork



association, for example, has more than 60 members. The associations all are based in Whiteriver, as are the tribal and local U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs offices.

"We're hurting financially," Gatewood says, "when an association lacks money, it sells cows to meet its payroll, so the cattle are dropping in numbers." Grazing areas have been deteriorated by drought and roads cut by the lumber mill, he says. The roads also have made poaching easier.

"Here, the two-legged predators outnumber the four-legged predators," Gatewood says. "Poachers will shoot a cow, take the hind quarters and leave the rest. It happens year-round up here."

But assistance from outside agencies, such as the UA and the BIA, has helped soften the blow of hard economic times somewhat.

"Bob and Ed came to us as a people offering assistance," Gatewood says, "we realized we could get help from the UA and not just promises. The range conservation group with the BIA also has helped us develop springs and water pipes."

Racicot's 25 years of Extension work with Indian tribes in Montana and Arizona have given him rare insight into the needs of Indian cattle growers. He designed the livestock project specifically for the White Mountain Apache cattle associations.

He began by arranging meetings with BIA and tribal representatives regarding proper procedures, and then started holding meetings with association stockmen to "just talk—about horses, grazing, whatever they wanted." Racicot asked Bicknell to join the program in the

summer of the same year and another meeting with BIA representatives and stockmen followed.

"The stockmen listened," Bicknell recalls. "You could see Bob was bringing resources to them, and wasn't giving them a sales job." The stockmen agreed to allow Racicot and Bicknell to evaluate a sample of cows. The first year, they checked 463 cows from five associations. Since then, they have conducted follow-up evaluations each year for the five associations and have established new relationships with the others.

Despite their economic problems, the condition of the White Mountain Apache livestock is as good as any they've seen throughout the state, say Racicot and Bicknell.

"The state average pregnancy rate for livestock is 70 percent," Racicot says. "We have herds up here not much different than that. Last year, the North Fork herd sample had a pregnancy rate in the high 80s. At Cedar Creek we saw the same thing."

The high pregnancy rates are attributed to the use of simple management techniques that have proven effective: removing non-productive animals from the herd and a small amount of supplemental feeding.

"We're not here to change their cattle, they've got a genetic base here that they've had for years and years," Racicot says. "These little Herefords have lasted, and know how to survive this country. The cattle have survived right along with the people."

Something they'll both continue to do, Gatewood says, despite hard times.

Contact Gatewood at the White Mountain Apache Tribe, P.O. Box 700, Whiteriver, Ariz., 85941, (602) 338-4346; or at the cattle associations' business office, (602) 338-4418. Contact Racicot at the Navajo County Extension office, 402 E. Hopi, Holbrook, Ariz., 86025, (602) 524-6271; and Bicknell at the Maricopa Agricultural Center, 37860 W. Smith-Enke Rd., Maricopa, Ariz., 85239, (602) 568-2273.