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RICK WILKING / REUTERS / LANDOV

They steal cattle, don't they? Cattle rustling returns

Drought across the US has driven up the price of beef and made livestock a tempting target for theft

April 14, 2015 5:00AM ET

by **Dawn Fallik** (</web/20211127020900/http://america.aljazeera.com/profiles/f/dawn-fallik.html>)

On their ranch in Franklin, Texas, Bethany Fulton and Kevin Fulton leave their herd of 110 cattle outside to graze in the spring, separating them into small groups across 650 acres. Last June, they put 21 cattle in one pasture, checked on them and locked the gate for the night. The next morning, only six remained, the rest stolen by cattle thieves, likely with a trailer and some oats.

It might seem like a small thing, the loss of 14 heifers and one steer. But the Fultons spent up to \$2,700 per head to purchase the livestock just a few months earlier, in a time of record-high cattle prices.

“The pasture, it’s on the side of a county road, and the land has been in my family for 40 years. We’ve never had any issues before,” says Kevin Fulton. “[The thieves] lured them into the trap and the pens with some horse feed.”

Cattle rustling brings to mind “Bonanza

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20211127020900/http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052451>)” reruns and John Wayne movies. But as beef prices continue to climb because of drought and unemployment rates remain high, law enforcement officials are seeing cattle thefts increase from Florida to Wyoming. In 2014, nearly \$6 million worth of cattle was stolen in Texas and Oklahoma, according to the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA), a 138-year-old organization that works to end livestock theft.

Larry Gray, the group’s executive director of law enforcement, says such thefts occur “almost daily” in those two states. “It’s a sad situation because a lot of these are mom and pop owners and those cattle are their retirement. It’s their 401(k), their savings account,” he says. “So when someone steals 10 to 12 head of cattle, it seems small, but it really hurts those elderly people.”

Spring is the big season for theft. Animals cooped up in barns all winter are turned loose to pasture to graze. Many owners are absentee, meaning they don’t check on herds frequently, as long as water and grass are plentiful.

Calves wandering near fences make for easy targets — just reach over the fence, scoop one up and put it in the back of a pickup truck. Bigger takes — including 1,121 calves recently stolen from a large dairy farm (<https://web.archive.org/web/20211127020900/http://www.kcbd.com/story/28271165/more-than-1000-steer-calves-stolen-from-braums-farms-in-follett-tx>) over the course of several months in Texas — require a trailer and several trips.

Jerry Flowers, the chief agent of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry Investigative Services, says his agency receives roughly 1,500 reports of cattle theft each year. He joined the department after retiring in 2008 as a detective with the Oklahoma City Police Department. He’s still surprised, he says, by how common cattle theft has become.

“We go out every day. Today I have guys in northwest Oklahoma trying to chase down stolen cattle from Kansas,” Flowers says. “But we have roughly 80 livestock markets in Oklahoma, and 50 are just for cattle.”

Special Ranger Wayne Goodman at the Dublin Livestock Auction in March 2014 in Dublin, Texas. Some states are adding staff to fight rustling. Ron Jenkins / Fort Worth Star-Telegram / MCT / Landov

Some states are beefing up their cattle-theft fighting capacity. In December, Kansas Attorney General Derek Schmidt announced (<https://web.archive.org/web/20211127020900/https://ag.ks.gov/media-center/news-releases/2014/12/15/ag-schmidt-kansas-department-of-agriculture-work-to-combat-cattle-theft>) that his office was adding an investigative unit aimed at combating cattle theft. (His press office canceled

interviews with Schmidt and the head of the investigative unit without an explanation.)

Unlike most stolen merchandise, which is usually sold for much less than it’s worth, cattle often fetch the full market value when they are sold at auction, Flowers says. States are trying to encourage owners to brand their cattle, because then the livestock auction house, also called a sale barn, has a way to verify the seller in case of any questions.

"Probably the best way to protect livestock or property is to use the one thing the good Lord gave us all, common sense," says Flowers. "Identify your property. On cattle, that’s branding.”

But branding is less common than it once was because it's difficult to mark the large animals and costly to register them with the state. (Most states have a brand registration program, usually associated with the state department of agriculture.) Ear tags are popular but are easily removed.

Beef prices, meanwhile, reached an all-time high this month, according to the USDA. Dale Blasi, a professor and beef specialist at Kansas State University, says the prices are triple what they were just three or four years ago.

That's mainly because of a drought and record-breaking heat that has affected the entire Beef Belt — including California, Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma and Nebraska, where large ranches are common — since 2012. Without water, there's no grass, and cattle feed is expensive. So there are simply fewer cattle available for slaughter, he says.

"Today a 600-pound calf would bring around \$1,600, and that's not an animal that's ready for market. It needs another 800 pounds to get to finish weight," Blasi says. "In this economy, some people are willing to take that risk for a quick return." Blasi added four cameras and a security system to his research facility three years ago after some farm equipment was stolen. He made sure the cameras covered the area where hundreds of cattle graze.

"One day I saw on the video some guys come in a 2:30 a.m. carrying bolt cutters and casing the joint," he says. "People of the criminal mindset see an easy gain and minimal risk."

For the Fultons, their brand — "LF," after Kevin Fulton's grandfather — helped bring the cattle home. Almost six months after the livestock went missing, the thief tried to sell unbranded cattle stolen from another ranch at a market by the Fultons' home. The auction operator got suspicious about the out-of-town seller and the unbranded cattle. He called police and the TSCRA, who found the Fultons' branded cattle at the thief's Arkansas ranch. The family had to pay \$2,200 to haul the cows back to Texas; 13 of the 15 arrived safely.

"We didn't figure we'd get them back, never, ever," says Bethany Fulton. "The thieves were going to keep them and raise the calves, because it's hard to go through a sell barn when they're branded."

The couple has discussed adding cameras to their pastures and buying cattle insurance, but both options are expensive. "And," says Bethany Fulton, "we never thought there was a need to insure our cattle before this."

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