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# The Women Trying to Save the Meat Industry

An educational working ranch shows an example of a system that's better for employees, animals, and the earth



[Bridget Shirvell](#) Aug 6 · 6 min read ★



Over the past few years, the focus of Heifer Ranch, which has long worked to lift people out of poverty, has shifted to creating a better meat industry. Photos: Heifer Ranch

**N**ot far from Little Rock, Arkansas, lies a stunningly beautiful 1,200-acre ranch. Surrounded by water on three sides and filled with native grasses, the

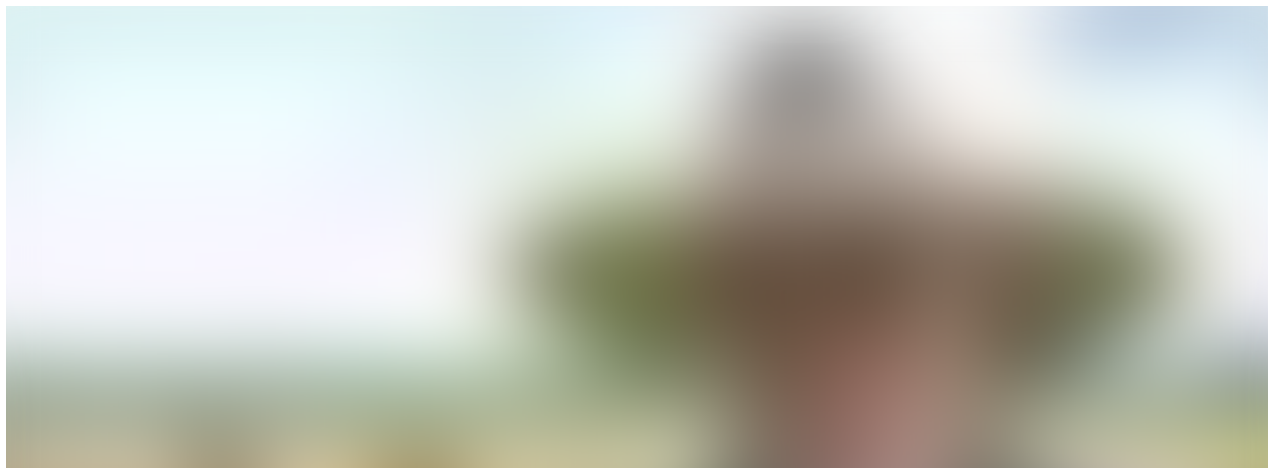
farm is home to thousands of chickens and turkeys, hundreds of sheep, cows and pigs, and six dogs. Overseeing it all is a group of women.

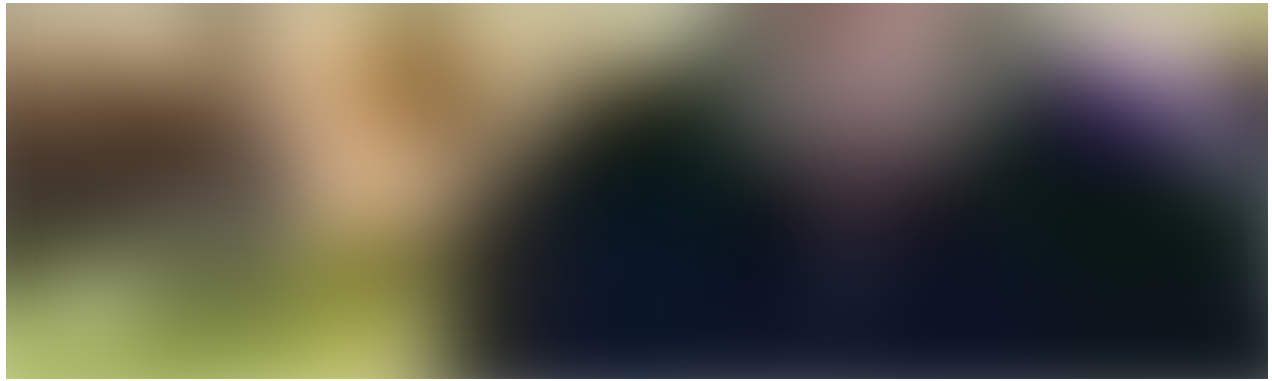
“We get asked all the time: Where are all the men?” said Donna Kilpatrick, who manages the property with her colleagues, Christine Hernandez and Kristen Crawley. To be fair, there is one man who works on Heifer Ranch, and, according to Kilpatrick, the intention has never been for the ranch staff and volunteers to be predominantly female. Over recent years, though, it’s mostly women who have been drawn to the mission-oriented educational ranch.

If the name Heifer sounds vaguely familiar, it’s because, yes, the farm is part of Heifer International. And yes, there is a ‘West Wing’ episode when President Barlet takes a photo with a goat from Heifer International.

As the country grapples with the reality of how fragile and often exploitative our industrial meat system is, this educational working ranch, the women who oversee it, and the small-hold farmers they work with might contain some of the keys to creating a meat industry that is better for workers, farmers, the earth, and even the animals we ultimately consume.

If the name Heifer sounds vaguely familiar, it’s because, yes, the farm is part of Heifer International. And yes, there is a West Wing episode when President Barlet takes a photo with a goat from Heifer International. The global nonprofit has been working since 1944 to end poverty and hunger, primarily through agricultural training and distributing livestock.





While Donna Kilpatrick didn't grow up on a farm she did spend time as child visiting her grandparents' farm, and during college fell in love with farming.

After acquiring 2,000 cattle that needed a home, Heifer purchased the ranch in Perryville, Arkansas, in 1971. The original plan was for Heifer to use the farm to breed cows and ship them to their programs overseas. However, it wasn't long before the organization realized there were several problems with that model for the animals and the people who would be receiving them.

The focus of the ranch pivoted to education, and while the core mission of working to lift people out of poverty hasn't changed, in the past few years, attention has shifted to the meat industry.

While the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting meat shortages at grocery stores due to shutdowns at industrial meatpacking plants forced consumers and politicians to think about the meat industry's sustainability, the reality is it's been a broken system for a long time.





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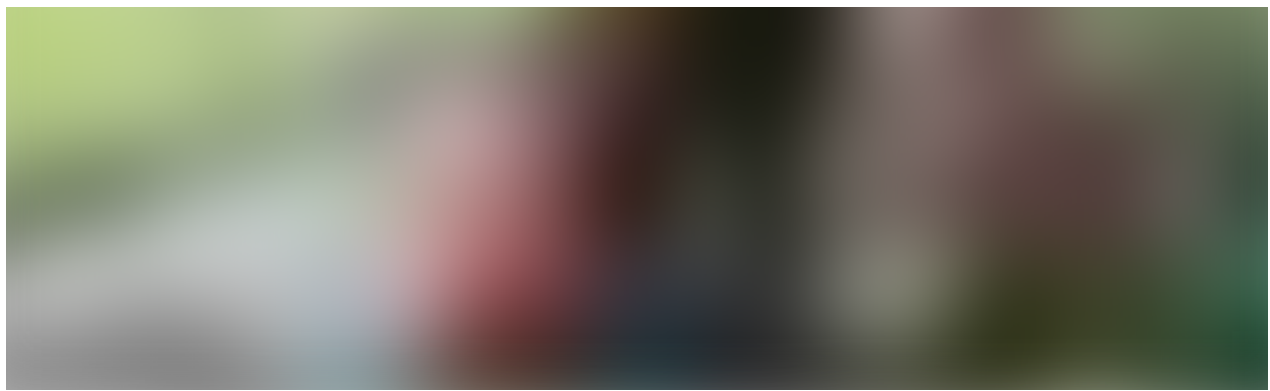
Report after report has shown the negative impact of our current industrial meat system on the environment, yet meat consumption remains high. Meanwhile, more than half of all farmers have lost money every year since 2013, while workers at meatpacking plants face dangerous conditions for low wages and little to no benefits.

In addition to managing Heifer Ranch, Kilpatrick, Hernandez, and Crawley work with small-hold farmers in the United States, helping to make their farms sustainable and find a market for Heifer's and the farmers' products through the Grass Roots Farmers' Cooperative. The e-commerce platform that gives consumers across the country access to humanely raised, organic meat that's fed non-GMO feed.

The ranch works as a backstop, ensuring there is enough product for the cooperative to meet demand and providing technical support to farmers, sometimes even helping to defray the costs of some upfront expenses.

“We'll work with anyone. Anyone who wants to learn to farm can grow food,” said Hernandez, who first came to the ranch as a volunteer and now helps to train both volunteers and cooperative farmers, including young, beginning farmers and/or farmers from historically underrepresented groups. While the coronavirus pandemic has postponed many of their in-person training sessions, they hold Facebook Live sessions on things such as swine production and poultry training.





The women that manage Heifer Ranch strive to give the animals they raise a happy, healthy, low-stress life.

Currently, about 30 farmers are part of the cooperative, which sells poultry, pork, and beef products. According to Hernandez, poultry tends to be the easiest way for farmers to get involved with the cooperative because it has a lower-cost barrier to entry.

It's not just the products the cooperative needs that make farms a good fit. Farmers have to adhere to Heifer's animal welfare guidelines, which run almost eight pages and cover everything from making sure animals have fresh, clean water, grass, and shade to ensuring their lives right up until the very end are as low-stress as possible. They also sometimes require farmers to work well into the night.

Farmers have to adhere to Heifer's animal welfare guidelines, which run almost eight pages and cover everything from making sure animals have fresh, clean water, grass, and shade to ensuring their lives right up until the very end are as low-stress as possible.

"It's the least amount of stress for us to load chickens [on trucks for processing] when it's dark outside," Hernandez said. "We'd all rather be home at 9 at night, but it's just something that we do."

They also don't allow Cypress Valley Meat Company, which processes their animals, to use hot shots or cattle prods to get animals off trailers.

Heifer Ranch is bigger than the animals. Kilpatrick, who joined Heifer International in 2007 but has been working on the ranch for just the past two years, brought regenerative agriculture to the farm. One of agriculture's recent buzzwords, regenerative agriculture is a way of farming that helps increase organic matter in the soil, build overall soil health, and draw carbon out of the atmosphere. The science on how much carbon it helps take out of the atmosphere is murky. Still, while most livestock production has a substantial environmental footprint, regenerative agriculture focuses on healing the earth while creating nutritious food.



To scale up production Heifer Ranch has begun to focus on regenerative agriculture.

Sustainable agriculture has long been a focus at Heifer, but Kilpatrick sees regenerative ranching as a way to increase their yield.

“To scale up, we had to take a step back, look down at the soil, figure out how we can grow better forage for the livestock,” Kilpatrick said.

Increasing production will help them meet growing demand at the cooperative, but it's also vital to proving that their model can be financially sustainable, which is imperative if they want to teach farmers both how to be profitable and how to treat land differently than it has been traditionally farmed.

Sitting on Kilpatrick’s desk at the ranch are seven jars of soil. “It’s pretty low-quality, Kilpatrick said. “My hope and dreams are that when I’m long gone, there’s another set of soil that looks like chocolate sitting here.”

While that soil is the foundation of their mission, it’s just one small part of their goal to reinforce you can care for the earth and make a living through a more humane agricultural system.

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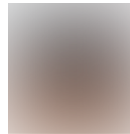
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