Jed Heaton started Range Water Solutions and Supplies in 2001, designing and installing trough systems for ranchers. He has clients throughout Oregon, Utah, Nevada and Wyoming.

Creating 21st-Century Troughs

The Heaton family helps ranchers quench their cattle's thirst

By Dianna Troyer

Jed Heaton says a contractor who backed out of a job did him a favor in the long run.

"I wanted to have some pipe ripped in so some water troughs could be filled for our cattle, and we wouldn't have to haul water for them," recalls Jed, who lives in the Standrod area. "This person agreed to do it, but then said he got a better job someplace else."

Jed bought some equipment and did the work himself.

"Through word of mouth, we started helping other ranchers develop springs and ponds into permanent watering systems," says Jed.

He started Range Water Solutions and Supplies in 2001.

"We never thought it would get this big because we don't advertise and just have our website, www.thirstycows.com," says Jed.

His work season starts in April and ends in December, depending on weather.

"It really started growing about eight years ago," he says of the family-owned company, nicknamed Thirsty Cows by his son Tykus two years ago.

His company has built watering systems for ranchers in Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming and Oregon, often in conjunction with the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

To get the jobs done, he and his wife, Meshia, rely on employees Klint Lloyd, Austin Ward, Sam Hurst and their oldest children, Tykus, 17, Jayc, 15, Braylee 13, and Kuy, 11.

"Our younger ones, Lydia and Alyza, will help more when they're older, but for now they love to go along and 'camp out' with Dad," Jed says.

Due to his work volume, Jed buys supplies in bulk and sells pipe, floats, troughs and valves to ranchers who want to put in their own systems.

On his ranch, he stocks 1½-inch flexible pipe that has 6,000 feet on a roll, and

Two of Jed and Meshia's children, Tykus, 17, and Braylee, 13, hold up a McElroy welder, which is used to fuse joints in the high-density polyethylene pipes used for sending water to the troughs. Right, Meshia handles the administrative and inventory duties for Range Water Solutions and Supplies, nicknamed Thirsty Cows.

2-inch pipe with 4,000 feet on a roll. In spring, Jed orders semitrailer loads of pipe from his supplier in Texas to have enough for the work season.

Meshia keeps track of the vast inventory, payroll and invoicing.

"It's complicated, so I rely on this," she says, holding up a thick notebook with neat dividers to track contracts, schedules and other information. "People like Jed's work because he knows how a cow thinks and can recommend the best place to put the troughs or ponds and how to configure the pipes. Plus, he has a reputation for doing a quick and quality job. The systems will last for a long time with little maintenance."

Jed uses high-density polyethylene pipe that can be fused together at joints with a McElroy welder.

"That joint is amazingly strong," Jed says.

The circular troughs he installs are durable, too, because they are made from tires used on massive gold mining equipment in Nevada. When the 12-foot-tall, 5-foot-thick tires have a certain amount of wear, they cannot be used at the mines.

"We get them and cut them in half, so they're about 27 inches tall," he says. "They're great because unlike metal troughs, they won't rust, dent or spring a leak. When we put them in, we laser level the ground, so water is level in the trough."

He has installed as many as six level troughs on a single float in one location, so the float controls storage of 9,600 gallons of water.

One local job was burying 8½ miles of direct bury wire for underground electrical lines at the City of Rocks National Reserve.

"Now there are no power lines or utility poles in that area," Jed says. "We sawed through a lot of rock—about 4,300 feet—on that job."

Another big job was near Arco. Jed put in 42 miles of pipe and 110 tire troughs on Bureau of Land Management property. The water came from wells drilled by nearby Idaho National Laboratory managers to monitor their plant.

Last fall, Jed and his crew spent several weeks in northeastern Utah near Randolph, helping ranchers build a good water source for their cattle.

"We laid 50,000 feet of 3-inch main line pipe and grouped 20 tire troughs together in sets, with a float controlling them, so they fill level," Jed explains.

Jed says installing the water systems has slowly overtaken his ranching business through the years.

"Eventually, I had to hire someone to help run the ranch," he says. "I schedule the projects so I'm home for two to three weeks to do our one cutting of hay."

Besides using his heavy equipment to install water systems, Jed uses it to help fight forest fires with a neighboring rancher, Blake Wickel, who manages crews.

"We're starting our third three-year contract with the Forest Service," says Jed. "This winter, we had to resubmit our equipment inventory list. You never know how busy you'll be with that."

When not laying pipe in winter, Jed maintains his equipment and contacts potential clients to discuss the projects they want to do when the weather warms up. He and Meshia also attend their children's basketball games, snowmobile, calve and feed their cattle.

"I wonder where we'll be going next summer," Jed says. "We're always up for the next job." ■