

**Sally Witkowski – Cross W Ranch
A Ranch on a Mission**

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Sally Witkowski: And they find us. Doctors recommend us, because an inflamed animal is going to bring inflammation to your body. And so, an organic cow is not the same as a grass-fed, grass-finished organic cow, because a cow that's been grain-finished has to be processed before it's two or it's so sick it's going to die. If our cow isn't processed by the age of two, it can live to be 15, its full regular life, because it's healthy.

Cooley Ludtke: That was Sally Witkowski of Cross W Ranch in Howell, Michigan.

In 2015, Sally and her husband Jim Witkowski started a cattle ranch. They were on a mission. Their plan was to produce the cleanest, most nutritious food for their family and the broader community.

They got into ranching as complete beginners. Now they're using some of the most forward-thinking practices to raise their livestock and restore the soil on their 300-acre farm.

Cliff Scholz: They also found creative ways to reduce waste and generate more income. We met with Sally on a beautiful summer day at the ranch and she told us their story.

Cooley Ludtke: It's a story with a lot of big takeaways about food and farming. I'm Cooley Ludtke.

Cliff Scholz: And I'm Cliff Scholz

Cooley Ludtke: Let's get into it.

[1:25]

Part 1: Motivations and Getting Started | Length: 7:41

Cliff Scholz: Sally, I met you and Jim in 2018, and I learned that you came into this as a career changer. You bought the property and started Cross W Ranch in 2015.

Sally Witkowski: This is our eighth year. So it's a startup.

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Cliff Scholz: It's still a startup.

Sally Witkowski: Still a startup. Yeah, I was saying that it was vacant land, so we had to put up all the buildings. We had to put up all the fencing, we had to plant the pastures. We had to buy a herd.

Cliff Scholz: Starting from scratch. Your knowledge base started from scratch, too. You had no farming in your backgrounds.

Sally Witkowski: Not at all.

Cliff Scholz: So why did you get into this?

Sally Witkowski: Our origin story is fascinating in that it revolves around saving our daughter's life, for health reasons, which is why we're so intensive about remineralizing the soil, being regenerative, the optimal health for the animals.

She had emergency brain surgery. She was born with two brain malformations, corrected the one that was causing her body to... she was in the process of shutting down. And it was just before her eyes were about to stroke and go blind. And then the next step would have been death from the pressure in her brain. Emergency brain surgery. She was very much debilitated from the years of brain pressure because these were birth defects, malformations, a Chiari malformation, and then I can't remember the name of the... But basically she had a stent put in instead of a shunt. So the cerebrospinal fluid would drain properly. But the brain damage was so catastrophic that the brain could really only focus on life support activity. And so whenever she ate, it had to be clean. Otherwise it would disrupt life support activity. And clean food didn't exist. I couldn't get grass-fed, grass-finished organic beef at Whole Foods, you know, 14 years ago or however many years ago.

So we are developers and we would buy farmland and we would develop them into subdivisions. And so we had a five-acre parcel from a development we were putting together and we're like, "We'll move there and we'll grow all the food for her and we'll save her life." Well,

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my husband's like, "We need to do the beef, the chicken, the, you know, you have to have all the proteins, too."

And I was I like, "Okay, well, let's look for 35 acres." And we're looking for 35 acres.

And then Jim, the entrepreneur, always forward-thinking, he's like: "She's the canary in the coal mine. If her brain is doing that, so is ours, we just don't know." There's so much pollution in the foods and the excitotoxins on the brain.

So we were looking to develop this, actually, and we came across this and he's like, "Nope, let's keep it for ourselves and let's do it at a large scale and provide clean, healthy food for our community."

Because what we learned about food during her health is that what we eat isn't what we think it is, and it isn't doing for our bodies what we need it to do for our bodies. So that's why we took on this large of a scale, and that's how it started.

Cliff: So basically you knew nothing about farming. No experience at all going into this.

Sally Witkowski: No. We didn't even have gardens. We had a dog. No animals. Didn't garden. Nothing.

Cliff Scholz: So that means you were starting with a clean slate. No preconceptions. A beginner's mind.

Sally Witkowski: Literally, yeah. The only thing we knew is that food was absent minerals, and it wasn't feeding us. And then the things that we were adding, the herbicides and the pesticides, are actually harming us. And if the minerals aren't in the food, your body's not getting you the minerals for healthy cell turnover. And you're going to have to take a supplement, because you can only go so long without mineralizing your cells.

Cliff Scholz: So that's your fundamental motivation here.

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Sally Witkowski: Yes. Which is why we partner with John Kempf and we buy molybdenum and selenium and cobalt, and we spray it on the fields to remineralize it as quickly as possible.

Cliff Scholz: John Kempf. How did you connect with him?

Sally Witkowski: Jim found him on the Internet, YouTube videos. What he said really resonated with him, what we had learned about health. We've been doing organic and functional doctors since I was 16. I brought it into the marriage and then we had some precocious puberty from all the soy in milk and chicken with our oldest daughter. And then we really went hardcore — half-baked, because we didn't have enough knowledge. We did it poorly, but we were going in that direction.

Cliff Scholz: So you're saying it's the soy in the animal feed that's producing some of these health effects?

Sally Witkowski: Yes.

Cliff Scholz: That sounds like another factor in your decision-making. What would you tell people who say, "I want to do what your family is doing?"

Sally Witkowski: I would say, buy some land and do it. You figure it out as you go. You don't have to know a lot beforehand, right? Keep the animal alive. Put the seed in the soil. You can learn as you go. You're going to make mistakes. We still make mistakes.

Cliff Scholz: So there were lessons along the way.

Sally Witkowski: This land had sat fallow, the owner had passed. He had been leasing it and it had sat fallow for two years, so we were already two thirds of the way through organic certification. We just had to wait that one year. So we ran out, we bought some seed and we put it in that field and we lost that field for three years, because 1% of it, the treatment was petroleum-based. So that's a big mistake, because we couldn't certify our animals. We certified all of our other pastures, but we couldn't certify that one. And any animal who had eaten off of it, they were done.

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So: fencing for the animals. We put up the t-post. And then you've got the wire and the little barbed wire around the top, and it's five feet tall. Apparently cows can jump over that, and it didn't hold them in, and they can run through it if the field over there looks yummier than the field they're on. And so then we put in ten miles of fencing, then we had to put in another ten miles of fencing of high-voltage tension wire. So, lots of mistakes. But, it's a good way to learn.

So I've got people like, oh, we're thinking about doing chickens. I'm like, "Just do it." The biggest drawback is you need a chicken-sitter if you want to go on vacation. And they're doing it in subdivisions now. And the argument is, is that it should be protected by Right to Farm. And so people are bumping up against that to see how far they can go. But, just get started. Just get started.

Cliff Scholz: So the message I'm hearing here is, don't be afraid of making mistakes.

Sally Witkowski: Yeah. Well, so we lost our first cows because they jumped over the fence and we couldn't get them back because they were new here. So we couldn't catch them and get them back. We had to put them down and process them. And so we got no cows. That was our first two. Not that that was going to be anything, but we were just excited to have two. Then we bought a herd of 30. And then we put in a lot more fencing. So we had to re-fence. We put in the wrong seed and we had to reseed. We kept the bull in with the heifers and the cows for too long and we were calving during that winter. What was it called when it was like nine degrees below zero?

Cliff Scholz: The polar vortex?

Sally Witkowski: The Polar Vortex, yeah, we were calving and lambing during that. And then if a calf or a lamb are rejected by their mom, you're bottle feeding. So at two in the morning, my husband and daughter are out at the ewe, getting the colostrum out for the little lamb that's been rejected. Nobody wants to do that. So now we only have our bull in there for a short period of time and calve in the spring.

Cliff Scholz: Good plan.

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Part 2: Meeting the Market | Length: 7:09

Cliff Scholz: Now of course, this is a business. What kind of customers are you attracting?

Sally Witkowski: People who have health problems, who their doctor has said, “Only eat grass-fed, grass-finished organic beef.”

We have a lot of sick people who have gone the journey of Western medicine and have discovered the quality of the food and how that's a hindrance. And they find us. Doctors recommend us because an inflamed animal is going to bring inflammation to your body. And so, an organic cow is not the same as a grass-fed, grass-finished organic cow, because a cow that's been grain-finished has to be processed before it's two, or it's so sick it's going to die. If our cow isn't processed by the age of two, it can live to be 15, its full regular life, because it's healthy. I hesitate to say some of these things because people will take offense to the things that we think are wrong about the food industry, but we just do. And other people do, too, and that's why they buy from us.

So, you are what your food eats, right? And everyone says that fish, the omega three to omega six ratio is 1 to 1. It's like the healthiest animal protein you can eat. Grass-fed, grass-finished organic cows are 1 to 1, also. So are pasture-raised chicken.

And that's another thing that's against us, right? Someone is saying that red meat is bad for you. Don't eat it. And they're right, if it's grain finished, that ratio can be as high as 16 to 1 or 20 to 1. And that's going to cause inflammation in your body. So it is bad for you, but it's a blanket statement, and not all beef is bad. And so that's a hard, high hurdle to overcome. And I've got customers who were vegans and they weren't doing well and their doctor said to eat meat and they said, only eat this one. And one was a — she's a cancer survivor — and she was told by her oncologist: Never eat meat again. You know, you could get inflammation and your cancer could come back.

She wasn't doing well. She went to a different kind of a doctor, like a functional-type doctor. And the doctor is like, you need to be eating animal protein, but only eat grass-fed, grass-finished organic.

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And not a lot of people are doing what we're doing, unfortunately. And that's a problem. That's the biggest problem. I wish more people were doing what we were doing, because we don't produce enough to feed everyone who wants it. And that's hard for us to grapple with, right?

Cliff Scholz: Yeah, I can see that. Inflamed animals make for pro-inflammatory food. That's sounds like an important idea. But why aren't other farmers doing grass-fed, grass-finished beef? Is it difficult to make this work?

Sally Witkowski: Well, yes, because you have to have more land, because if they're on grain, they can be in a barn and you don't need the land. Even certified organic cows that are labeled grass-fed, they're not labeled grass-finished. They only have to be on pasture for like, I don't know, 120 days out of the year, not all year-round. So it is an economic thing. But if more people were doing it at our scale, like we can feed our community, someone in Genoa do it and they can feed their community and someone in Brighton do it and they can... you know what I mean?

But we've been funneled into Big Ag where we've got, you know, only a small number of agricultural corporations that are producing all of the beef and all of the pork and all of the chicken, and they'll never convert, and they make enough money to give money to re-election campaigns to keep them off of their back. So, the hurdles are against you, doing this.

But, if enough small people start doing it, and that is a trend, like homestead startups. Like when we were doing it, we were seeing story after story of ex-football players doing it and, you know, stuff like that, just buying a small tract and doing it. Or a homestead for yourself. So, I think we're in that trend. Because people are pulling away from the factory-raised animals.

Cliff Scholz: Yeah. So, what I'm hearing you say is, you need more land per animal to raise grass-fed, grass finished cattle, so it costs more. And you're competing with factory-farmed animal operations. What about other costs, like veterinary bills?

Sally Witkowski: Yeah. So interesting you say that because it's come out that the cattle industry wants to do the mRNA vaccinations in the cows. And so you've got the pro-vaccine group and you've got the anti-vaccine group. We don't vaccinate. We've never vaccinated. We

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don't have health issues. We don't have vets come out. We don't have cancer. We have injuries. And we treat the injuries ourselves.

We have vets come out for our horses and we take on overflow from a horse rescue farm, and when they get too many, we take 'em, and they've been abused, so they're not healthy animals. So that's the only vet bills that we have. They don't come out for our cows. We don't have the problems with our chickens.

Same with us, right? The healthier we eat, the healthier our body will be. We'll see the doctor less. We'll get off of medications.

Cliff Scholz: Yeah. Got it. So, how did you and Jim educate yourselves about caring for animals?

Sally Witkowski: It's interesting, you know, how do you find information that resonates with you? Because the Internet has both sides of the story. You want to try and be more open-minded and think more critically than just buying what the experts are saying. So many people tell us we're doing it wrong. You'll never make money at organic. You're doing it wrong. But do your own research. It's out there. It's out there. Again, if you're if your goal is just to do your own food, that's fantastic in and of itself. Right? Your hen lays an egg that day. You're eating a fresh egg. It's got a lot more nutrients in it fresh than a week old, six weeks old from a store. So buy a chicken, feed, do it.

But, if you've been exposed to, you know, the feeds aren't good, the byproducts that they're putting into it. Or like dog food, when they started learning about all the health problems they're having with dog food and the acidic digestive tract, they switched dog food to non-grain, because no one was buying the grain dog food anymore. And what'd they put in it? Pea protein. There's this vegetarian mindset: vegetarian is healthy. Well, then all these dogs started getting health problems because, sure, peas are fine, but in large quantities it was actually bad for the animals. So a lot of it is, you bump up against it in real life, the school of hard knocks. And you're like: Okay, this isn't working. And you make adjustments.

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Surround yourself with like-minded people. For regenerative agriculture, that's bigger in South America than it is here. So those are the farmers that I read about what they're doing. You just have to seek out the information.

Cliff Scholz: Understood.

[16:18]

Part 3: Revenue Streams | Length: 7:15

Cliff Scholz: Sally, what are your main revenue streams here at the ranch?

Sally Witkowski: The cows. That's our biggest operation. That is probably 60%, 70% of our income, is the cattle. And then chickens. And honestly, most of our focus is increasing the cattle operation and increasing the chicken operation, which we went to bundles this year to move it more quickly. Because we were just selling, you know, cuts here and cuts there and not doing a lot of advertising because we're a small producer. So then when we bundled, we sold out of a third of our flock in half a day.

Cliff Scholz: For our audience, what's 'bundled' mean?

Sally Witkowski: Instead of like, "Hey, I want to get two breasts and a whole," we bundled a whole four packages of breasts, four packages of thighs. So now we're moving every part of the animal. The standard American diet doesn't eat the whole animal. There's a lot of waste. As a bundle, we can offer a discount, because we're moving everything faster. We're making less money, but we can produce more. So overall, we'll make more money.

Cliff Scholz: What kinds of discounts are you giving on the bundled chicken?

Sally Witkowski: We took 10% off. And remember, farming margins are low. I mean, I don't even know how many... 16,000 pounds at least of chicken feed because there were eight totes out there and our totes are a ton. So, you know, it's just a lot of feed. And we're soy-free, as well. And that's a niche in the healthy food industry, is soy-free. It is. And so that feed is more expensive. And for a while — here's another mistake we made — we bought a big, huge grinder

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and we bought totes of all the ingredients to grind our own feed. And it worked fine when we were a small chicken producer. But as soon as we got bigger, we were spending more time grinding the feed, and not saving money, because we needed a bigger grinder. You don't know what you need until you know what you need. And so it just didn't make sense to grind our own feed. But that was six years ago when you couldn't find soy-free feed. But soy-free has become known, and now there's a greater demand. So it's easier for us to find soy-free feed.

So: cows, then chickens. We did hemp for a while, when it was new to the state, and we did it because of the neurological miracles it did for our daughter. Whole-plant, because everyone else isolates. You have to eat everything because everything works synergistically, you know, not just the CBD. You've got the chlorophylls, you've got the lipids, you've got the terpenes, you've got all these other things that work synergistically for that plant to be healing to your body. So we did that until the state came in and our original fees were \$500 a year to do it. Then they went up to as high as \$5000, and then we just stopped. So we cut out hemp.

We did hogs for a while, but we don't have enough labor. And the cattle herd, as big as it is and the chicken flocks as large as they are, they occupy more time than they used to. So we don't have time to do, you know, six, eight hogs a year.

We used to do lamb. We don't have anyone to do that anymore.

And then, we weren't selling the whole cow. No one was buying the organs. No one was buying the bones. And so out of necessity, we made dog food. And so now dog food has become a really big producer for us because the state of the dog food is now making them sickly, and people are realizing it.

Cliff Scholz: Life expectancy is way down.

Sally Witkowski: Way down for dogs. I mean, we've got some crazy stories of people converting to our dog food.

Cliff Scholz: Sally a couple years ago you told me you were fermenting the feed for your poultry? You said it was a kind of a game-changer in terms of the profitability of your poultry operation.

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Sally Witkowski: Until we got this big.

Cliff Scholz: Okay.

Sally Witkowski: So we can only ferment for the layers.

Cliff Scholz: The laying hens.

Sally Witkowski: ...which, you know, the energy that you get, that they get from that fermented feed keeps your feed costs down. But the time to ferment at this scale, it's now counterproductive. So we're not able to do that. But we give them apple cider vinegar, and we only do it when they can be out perching in the trees and they've got acres and acres to roam around and eat bugs and spring grasses and everything like that. So that's really where your health comes from. And then, a clean feed will also help a lot.

Cliff Scholz: How many chickens are we talking about?

Sally Witkowski: So we're in the middle of processing a thousand birds. Back in April, we bought a thousand chicks. You get them one day old so they can be certified organic, no vaccines or anything like that. I'm no chicken expert. My son-in-law is the chicken guy. I believe it's like 14 weeks to get a chicken to market weight. Ours were dressing out at seven and a half pounds. No one... I mean, that's a small turkey. Everyone's like, "You got really big chickens." And they're still delicious. They weren't tough or anything, but they were just getting big because they've been selectively bred to get big quickly. So we process ours earlier, because the cleaner the food, the more they utilize that better. They absorb more out of the feed and they're healthier and they grow faster in that type of a food environment.

Cliff Scholz: Any other value-added revenue streams going on here?

Sally Witkowski: So next is, when you process a chicken, you have the neck and the back, the carcass, and we get them from the processor. A lot of people just throw them out. We've got a lot of health-conscious, make-your-own-food people, so we sell a lot of necks and backs, and

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you make broth and soup out of it and everything. Well, my daughter now makes broth and we sell organic chicken bone broth as a value-added. What else do we do?

Cliff Scholz: Chicken feet?

Sally Witkowski: The chicken feet? Oh, yeah, yeah. And we've got dog customers for the chicken feet. And then, like, if I'm making a broth, I'll add extra feet to my whole chicken that I'm simmering.

Cliff Scholz: How do you market your products?

Sally Witkowski: We do wholesale to two stores. We used to wholesale to three, but the other one, they moved and downsized. But again, our problem is we don't have enough cows for the demand that's out there in the market. And so that's our thrust right now. But honestly, when the grocery stores went bare during Covid, everyone's like, "Okay, I'm relying on big box store to feed my family. I live in a rural area. I need to find local producers to feed my family."

And so that's a trend, and I think that's a trend that's not going to go away. So, three years ago, we sent our newsletter out to 17 people, and this last newsletter went out to 1400 people. And that's just people searching on the Internet and trying to find something local. We do have people who will drive a ways, you know, east side of Detroit or Grand Rapids or something like that. But for the most part, everyone's pretty close. It's a trend, and I think that's going to continue, and it's going to help everyone who starts doing something like this.

[23:34]

Part 4: Ag Tourism as a Revenue Stream | Length: 4:01

Cliff Scholz: We're sitting next to a huge beautiful building here. How's this fit into all this?

Sally Witkowski: My husband's an entrepreneur. He likes helping people start small businesses. And originally we built this, and each of these bays was going to be for someone to rent space to have a small business. They're going to be a small engine repair or an artist who

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wanted to do a kiln or anything like that. He wanted to have space where people could come in and work. Because those types of spaces don't exist.

So our daughter got engaged before we found this property, and she wanted to have a barn wedding. And so we're driving around to barns and looking at all this stuff. And then in the midst of that, we decide to buy a larger scale. We find this property. I have a background in designing homes, and so I've designed a lot of homes and we're builders and we've built them. And he's like, okay, this is the kind of barn I want, and this is what I want it to do. So I start doing some drawings for him and everything, and we had settled on it. And then Jim's like, "Well, we bought the land and your wedding isn't until September. Have it in our barn!"

I was like, "Okay, well: this is the guest list. This is how it needs to flow to get my six-foot, round tables in it. And people can walk around the chairs. I mean, literally... and we settled on this, and we built it. And while we're building it, people keep coming off the road and talking to us about it and everything. And we've got friends who are like, "Oh my gosh, my daughter wants to get married here."

We're like, "Oh, sure." You know? So we start saying yes to people.

During my daughter's wedding, someone came in off the road and said, "I rent barn weddings. Call me. I want to rent this out for you. I could have this booked two years out in a week."

It was the trend. And so we're like, sure. And so we did this for her wedding and we've got two other kids who we knew would use it as well. But then we're like, well, we'll rent it out for other revenue. And the term is called 'ag tourism,' which is a good way for farmers to keep their land, because again, a good year is breaking even, farming. And when we started learning about ag tourism — agricultural tourism — anything to bring people to your property. It's a marketing tool. And so we would go to ag tourism conferences and people would go up and speak and they're like, "We were just about to lose our fourth-generation farm. And then we started ag tourism and we kept the farm, and now we're making good money. Now we're doing blueberry ice cream and blueberry u-picks and blueberry muffins."

So ag tourism was this huge thing, and states started passing ag tourism that municipalities can't say no because no municipality wants it. Our municipality is still fighting us on it.

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Cliff Scholz: But finally you prevailed.

Sally Witkowski: Finally we prevailed because the state stepped in. So those are some of the things that farmers come up against. But farmers need additional revenue streams. They just do. Whether it be work off the farm and have a job where you do something. The people that process our chicken, Jake was telling me, they're one of the largest contractors of sprayers of dirt roads to tamp down the dust. And so that's what they do on the side. Every farmer does something on the side.

Jim and I bought this property... well, our youngest was sickly and had to move here with us. She was still not well enough to be on her own or work or anything yet. The other two moved here to do it with us. So, just think of the farmer who's not making it, who's busting a hump and another job to make ends meet. And the kids are like, "I don't want that life." Well, if you can make a profit on it, now we're not going to sell the family farms to subdivisions. The kids are going to do it because it can support them. Our projected marketing model and business model and feasibility study has all of us working here full-time, making a very good living. But it takes a lot of work. It takes additional things. Weddings is part of it. We incorporated that.

[27:34]

Part 5: A Regenerative Approach to Food Quality | Length: 6:30

Cliff Scholz: Sally, you had mentioned a couple of years ago about how you're producing your own hay, and that you were getting high yields compared with what is standard in our part of the country. How'd that happen?

Sally Witkowski: So part of it is a multi-species pasture. And so plants actually remineralize the soil, not just animal activity and the fungus. We experimented with this one with 50 variety of seeds: grasses, sorghum, all kinds of, some wild forbs. So now you've got that synergy of a variety of plants who are inputting nutrients, and then this one is taking it up. So now you're feeding the soil with your variety of culture. Whereas every row crop farmer is monoculture, and that one is just sucking from the soil and not putting anything back, not feeding anything, not helping anything.

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Additionally, you've got the whole fungus world below the soil that, if it's communicating, it can go miles for a needed nutrient. But when you till the soil you break those connections. And now the only nutrients that are on your land are the ones you input yourself, and the prevailing culture in agriculture is petroleum-based, NPK: nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus. So, there's no soil-building, there's no nutrients in the soil for the plants to uptake. So now, your seed has a genetic potential, but that genetic potential is only met if you have the nutrients for it to reach it. If you don't, it won't.

So take that front pasture: We were working with John Kempf. We're sending him our soil samples. And our pasture is stunted, like here. And so we send him the soil and he's like, "Oh, you're short on whatever it was, magnesium, boron or calcium or whatever it was. And in two weeks we doubled the height of our pasture just because we were feeding it to reach its genetic potential.

Cliff Scholz: And you did that with foliar feeding. We've heard other stories like that.

Sally Witkowski: And then back to this field here. It's where the chickens are right now. It's where the sheep were. It was never row-cropped. So it's just thousands of years of dead trees breaking down. The dirt is black, like this deep. We scooped it out and we put it in our greenhouse, and we put in that 50-species pasture and our sorghum is 12ft tall. You're going to get a better yield if the soil is there to support the genetic potential of whatever you're planting.

And then take that 50-variety pasture mix. We had some left over. So we went back to a cow pasture and we planted like three acres because that's all the seed we had left. And when we moved the cows to that pasture, they all stampeded to those three acres. So an animal knows what it needs and will seek it out. Like a dog who has an upset stomach will go eat a bitter to get some relief. Even in our pastures with all they're doing, they're still lacking. We're still continually researching and trying to learn what will make a better pasture.

Cliff Scholz: That's fantastic, Sally. A while back you told me about a time when you had an aphid infestation starting to eat your crop.

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Sally Witkowski: Starting to eat our alfalfa crop. And that's, I mean, tens of thousands of dollars of loss because we'll have to buy the hay to feed our animals. So that's a big deal. So we get some soil tests to John because this is happening mid-year and we only get the soil tests every three years and then we get the spray. So a lot is happening, right? So he says, "Oh, you've got a deficiency in this. We'll mix up a foliar spray for you." We spray the field. And they leave, mid-season.

And the way John explains it is, frequency. So, everything emits a frequency and your frequency changes, especially with health. So everyone says, you know, a bee will go miles for nectar and it's the frequency that they're perceiving, right? They can't smell that far. They can't see that far. It's a frequency thing.

And so when ours had deficiency and it was sickly, that was the frequency that would feed it. So, as soon as it received that foliar spray and it got healthier, it flew right over and wouldn't eat it. It's easy application. Saved our next cuttings. This was row-cropped for decades. So it's nutrient-depleted soil. And so we have to get nutrients in as quickly as possible.

Cliff Scholz: Got it. It sounds like you're building your soil with a number of different strategies, besides the animals. So maybe we can recap: You're adding nutrients in the form of foliar feeding, and you're also planting a multispecies pasture. Sounds like a good plan.

Sally Witkowski: And then, my husband typically goes overboard on everything. So he's like, "Well, if five species is good, ten is better. Well, then let's do 20." Well, now he's up to 50, you know? We know that we need a varied diet. Different color fruits and vegetables, because it's a different nutrient profile for healthy cell turnover so we can have a healthy body. So why aren't we doing that with animal husbandry?

Cliff Scholz: Right. It seems obvious. What about composting?

Sally Witkowski: We're not composting, because we let all of the animal waste remain in the soil, and that is building soil. So I think we've built like maybe three or four inches of topsoil on our worst field. It's sand. It's terrible field. So at this scale, composting is hard, and the best is to just leave it where it is. Running animals is best. If you don't have animals, then I would say you need to buy a composting liquid and do the foliar spray. But animals do it for us. And then, when

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you spread out the hay and they're eating, that's also breaking down and going back into the soil as well.

Cliff Scholz: So it's back to the animals.

[34:03]

Part 6: Animal Care and Management | Length: 2:12

Cliff Scholz: You have animal handling practices that help minimize their stress. You mentioned you're working with Temple Grandin's methods.

Sally Witkowski: Yeah. That's her model. How you move animals. It's the natural instincts or actions of an animal. The pen is, is circular. The lanes that we have. Because every once in a while you want to run your animals through a chute and check them out. But if you force them, they get agitated. And that's all going to spark all of those cortisol levels and all those stress hormones and everything like that. We follow what other people have modeled and is working, and incorporate it here. But, I think the biggest thing is that, our pastures are open to the trees and so they just go into the woods and they wild forage and they lay in the shade there: a stress-free habitat.

We do the rotational grazing and that's how you get more animals on fewer acres. They move every day and a half. But also in moving every day and a half, the top part of the pasture is the sweet, delicious part. So they're thrilled, they're just jumping and frolicking. You know, they're happy to get over there and get to it. So you want to imitate nature as much as possible.

And we keep records of our animals, their births and how old they are and market weight and everything. And so, okay, this is the tag number that we want to take to market this month. And if that animal is agitated and not moving easily, okay, we'll get someone else. You know, just, we don't force it. We don't have to. There might be operations that have to, but just really letting them be as natural as possible.

Which always pushes us to better and better pasture mixes. Which aren't out there. Hopefully it becomes a growing trend, but there are very few producers of wild herbs and wild forbs and wild

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roots that we will inter-seed with, because they want it. A varied diet, you know, is going to bring in varied mineral content and nutrients, and that's just going to make for a healthier animal. We're not going to be healthy eating the same three things every day for a couple of years.

Cliff Scholz: For sure.

[36:16]

Part 7: Family, Succession, and Land Conservation | Length: 3:23

Cliff Scholz: Sally, you're on about 300 acres here. Do you think there has to be a family component for an operation of this size?

Sally Witkowski: For a startup, yes. Because Jim and I could never do this by ourselves. So there has to be someone. Family or group. Yes. At a scale like this. There are lots of husband-and-wife teams. They're still producing and doing fabulous job. But yeah, you can't do it yourself. There's just not enough, because you need that off-site job.

Cliff Scholz: Uh huh. What about your succession plan?

Sally Witkowski: Well, right now all the kids are doing it and want to do it, and raising their kids here. We've got a 16-year-old grandson who works with his dad's business, but we're incorporating him and working him in. And then my daughter's oldest is four, and he's hauling water and scooping feed, and they love it. And so, again, that sense of working together, doing a goal together, being part of a producer, not just a, my husband calls them "consumers" if they're not helping, you know, everyone has to be a producer. And then you enjoy doing it and you can make a living at it, then, that's the that's the goal of the succession plan, is that everyone will enjoy what they're doing. Will it be 100%? Probably not. But, beyond that, I don't know what we would do. It would be up to the kids what they wanted to do.

Cliff Scholz: Have you ever thought about taking steps to protect this land for the future?

Sally Witkowski: Yes, and Michigan has a mechanism for that. It's a conservatorship, where if you put your land into it, they'll pay up to 70%, up to a certain dollar amount of your land taxes

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for you. This was purchased by a corporation because we sold some land and we just did an exchange, a land exchange, and we're not eligible. But most farms, it's called PA 116 in Michigan, are in that, and that if you ever sell you'll owe back taxes. It's a way to lower the tax burden.

Another nice thing that the state does is, when we bought this land, it was an active farm. And as long as we got our operation up and running within a year, we stayed at that same tax base. It didn't trigger to the purchase date. And that tax basis was from the 70s. So that's another thing. Buying large tracts of land, if you want to encourage it, there have to be incentives to encourage it because no one can print money. You know, we have limitations. A lot of people want to do this. But, I know, OEFFA is our certifier, they're in Ohio, and they were talking about, and I don't know if it's in Ohio or if it's a federal thing, but just the lenders were there at one of the conferences we went to, that they'll lend money for the startup at really low interest rates and really long-term. So, people are seeing a need. It's just I'm not sure that those steps are big enough to actually bring it to fruition.

[39:34]

Part 8: Ranch Evolution and Plans | Length: 10:29

Cliff Scholz: And what are your plans here in the short term? How have you prioritized next steps?

Sally Witkowski: We would like to do eight cows a month. But we need to lease more land.

So if we had a herd of 300, we would have 100 to process that year. 100 a year before processing, and then 100 for the calving. So we would need a herd of about 300. And this isn't enough land. Although we did something new this year and we might be able to stay on this land. We're double-purposing our pastures and haying them. But we're going to plant annual pastures, and get a far higher yield. We already put up 500 bales on our first cutting. And that's really good for us. I think last year was around 350, after first cutting. But the annuals will be able to do even more. And so this land will be able to support more animals with the annual pastures.

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This is what Jim does from midnight to 2 a.m., is research ways to make this land work better for us. Better for the animals, too.

This is a big long boat we're slowly turning. So, building that corral was a big game-changer for us. One: in the safety for them selecting the animals or trying to check an animal that's injured or a preg check or something like that. But, you know, we didn't have hay equipment, so then we had to rent hay equipment, and we had fewer seed profiles and we weren't getting as great a yield. So we were having to buy hay. So everything is pushed economically to make it more profitable here so that it will support more families. So now we've got the three kids, so we've got four families it needs to support now. And then we finally got our own hay equipment. It was a big deal, but it took a long time to get there. Well, then the next step that we just did two years ago or three years ago, is a bale wrapper. And that is, you roll your round bale of hay in plastic, and it ferments. And so if you want to have your animal consume it in one month, you wrap it one time. If you need it to last six months, you wrap it six times. So, like this first cutting, we did all of our single-wraps or double-wraps or dry hay for like July when we get into a drought and we have to supplement with hay.

But that fermented hay in the winter is like being on wet pasture. So on a dry roughage hay, your animal is going to maintain body weight. But with a fermented baleage, they're actually going to put on weight and continue to grow. Big game changer for us.

Cliff Scholz: Can you tell us a bit about the administrative side and other practical aspects of your operation?

Sally Witkowski: So with the certification, every time we spray something on the field, we have to document it: what it was, when we purchased it, all of that stuff. When we did a cutting, how many bales we got. So there's a lot of bookkeeping from that end. I'm the collector of the information. When we have the inspections once a year, everyone brings their stuff and they go through it. And if we buy a seed, I've got to save the tags. I've got to save the receipt, I've got to record everything. So there is that nuance. And the hardest thing about it is keeping it at the forefront of your thinking. It's not difficult. That's what you have to do. And any business is going to have that aspect of it. But because we all work off site, any money that we make, gross income, not profit, goes right back into the next thing that we can do. Right now the kids are younger and just getting into this. We have family meetings all the time. Everyone is inputting

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and making decisions and everyone has their different creative inputs. But we do what we can do with what we have.

And what's the priority? So the priority has been equipment. So there really hasn't been anything besides that for a while. And then the yield of hay. So everything is economically driven. What's going to be our next priority? And then what are the long-term goals? And then also creatively, what else can we do on our property that will bring people here to bring awareness to what we're doing? So we've long wanted to do all the Marion Township producers and do like a farm market on a Saturday. We've got these mini ponies, put a saddle on it and walk the kids around in a ring and have our food truck and, it's never materialized.

And the township, going back to what are some of the obstacles, I have to apply for a special use permit and pay thousands of dollars and beg for permission to do it. Why? Why? Who am I harming? If I've got a neighbor who says, "You're encroaching on my peaceful Saturday," then I can tamp it down or move it or whatever. But, municipalities are a huge hindrance to farming, and they write ordinances that conflict with Right to Farm, and they harass farmers to comply. And if the farmer acquiesces, it's to their detriment. And if they have to fight it, who's got the money? And if they call the state and the state calls the municipality and says, "You can't do that," the municipality doesn't care and they do it anyway. And so, in some of the more affluent cities, they're trying to run the farmers out.

Cliff Scholz: Right from the start, you were looking for the best way to raise clean food. So, going conventional was never even a consideration.

Sally Witkowski: If you do their plan, their program, you get trapped into having to spend money over and over. You can't seed-save. You've got to buy their seeds all the time. You've got to buy their special spray all the time. You get on a treadmill. And it's hard to believe that it started so recently, yet it's so pervasive. And like: "The only way you can do it."

I mean, farmers around us, they don't think what we're doing is smart, profitable, will lead to anything. We're doing it wrong. And God bless them. They're beautiful people. They'll help you. They'll do whatever. But yeah, you cannot convince them to do it differently. And it's... it's what? Since the 90s?

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Cliff Scholz: What's gonna turn this thing around, Sally? Customer awareness has gotta be a piece of the equation here.

Sally Witkowski: Yes. You already see it. Aldi grocery store, they're over half organic now. Costco is over half organic, now. If you watch a commercial for Panera Bread, they talk about how clean their chicken is. People aren't buying it anymore.

Cliff Scholz: So how are you going to meet that growing demand?

Sally Witkowski: Originally we were thinking that we were going to need to lease land, which goes back to, if this rural community dies, there's no land for us to lease anymore and we pull up stakes and we have to go somewhere else and do this. And if we have to go too far rurally, the customer base won't be there and we won't be able to. And then we'll just produce for our families. So we want to get more land: lease land, buy land, expand, get into the hogs, get into the lambs, be able to offer it to more people and wholesale to more stores.

And, as an aside, but still synergistic with our mission, we're starting a group called Livingston-Local. We've got the Facebook page, we've got the domain name. We've got people who are going to help advertise it, run it. And then I'm soliciting growers and producers.

I used to have a storefront, and they would come in on Wednesdays. I sell out too quickly. I can't anymore. Once we get bigger and we can, you know, feed the people that are coming now, we'll go back to store.

But I was selling a homesteader's pickles or a homesteader's honey. Or a homesteader's maple syrup. No markup. I just want to provide good food.

Part of the mission is health to the community. So, Livingston Local is to do that on a mass scale to get the homesteaders and the gardeners who can more than they can eat, who give away to their neighbors, or who want to make lotions or whatever. And, you know, your only opportunity right now is a farmers market. And that's seasonal and limited to who will come to downtown Howell or downtown Brighton. So it is to bring together everyone who's producing something so that when I need honey, I don't have to go to Meijer to get honey, I can get honey here. Not to mention local is better, fresher is better, all of that stuff. So that's where we are right

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now as far as bringing health to the community, is bringing in more people who can do things that we can't do.

And then, our kitchen is Michigan inspected, but our goal is to get USDA inspection and do pre-made organic food. Because, when my daughter was really sick and I didn't have time to cook and I wanted to buy pre-made food, I couldn't. Clean didn't exist. So that's another goal of ours to have a kitchen and doing pre-made food. And then: a food truck.

Cliff Scholz: Sally, I love this vision you're sharing here. It's just so hopeful. Any final words?

Sally Witkowski: Well, Food is Medicine is our underlying theme for every decision we make. The demand is there. I see this is what the collective wants. I see it by people searching us out on the Internet and coming here to shop. And it's going to bubble up, and as we get punched down from big _____ fill in the blank, we're going to do it anyway, and we're going to become more community-oriented. And we'll get there. We'll get there.

[50:03]

Cooley Ludtke: That was Sally Witkowski of Cross W Ranch, located in Howell, Michigan. To learn more about Cross W and find more podcasts and videos, visit our website at farmsfortomorrow.org. You can also find us on Instagram and Facebook. Thanks for listening, and spread the word.

*** END OF TRANSCRIPT ***