

# United to Survive

*Dean Baker and family could get rich by selling their ranches and water rights to Southern Nevada Water Authority in Las Vegas. They said no.*

*Words by Susan Lynn. Photos by Abby Johnson.*



**M**eet a bullheaded, opinionated old goat! That's me," says Dean Baker, though many people would disagree. They know him to be a good rancher: thoughtful, honest, ethical, straightforward, hardworking, and thrifty. "He's in agriculture, which means he's an optimist," says son Tom.

Dean ranches with his three sons, David, Tom, and Craig, and their families in Snake Valley, which straddles the Utah-Nevada border. But Baker Ranches sit under the 21-year-old black cloud of the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) that wants to remove 200,000 acre-feet of water from five valleys in eastern Nevada and western Utah to allow for more growth in Las Vegas.

"That much water could run more pivots for agriculture, but I don't think the Nevada state engineer would certificate that many pivots using that much water," Dean says. "It's water that would leave the land and Snake Valley in an 82-inch pipeline for Las Vegas 300 miles away, if the applications are granted for the water. There would be no recharge

in the valley. And once the water flows to Las Vegas, there's no turning it off."

Dean finds himself between the proverbial rock and hard place.

The Bakers emphatically chose ranching over selling the ranches to SNWA, so the black cloud follows Dean in his day-to-day activities. It has changed his life's focus to the defense of the ranches and his community. Many days, instead of flying chemicals, seed and fertilizer onto the land, he's in Carson City or Salt Lake City talking with legislators, governors or water officials. He's in Ely, Nev., for county commission or water advisory board meetings. He's attending Nevada Rangeland Resources Commission, grazing board, or cattlemen's meetings. He's in Las Vegas talking to radio and TV hosts, or the Southern Nevada Water Authority Board, or to Mrs. Pat Mulroy, manager of the SNWA, an acknowledged smart power broker in Las Vegas. "I'm always up for a debate," grins Dean.

Regularly on the road for meetings, Hank Vogler, a neighboring sheepman and fellow

water crusader, says, "Dean and I spend more nights in motel rooms together than I ever spent with my wife."

Vogler also says: "You know a man by his actions, and that should tell you something about Dean Baker. At age 71, Dean's taken on Goliath."

On a typical day, Dean, David, Craig and Tom get the crews and workers started between 5:30 and 6 a.m. At seven, they meet for coffee to talk about resolving problems and setting priorities. Days can extend to 24/7 if crops or emergencies dictate. The morning meeting is the heart and nerve center of the operation.

Dean leaves much of the operations to his sons now. He sees that as both a blessing and a curse. "My sons are better at ranching than I ever was," he says. "They have the benefit of education, brains and tenacity...or you can call it stubbornness." All three sons and daughter Chris Robinson, an attorney in the San Francisco Bay Area, see him as a great role model. They have tremendous respect for his choices and for what he's built.

"We have mutual respect for each other," muses Dean. "I don't try to lead anymore."

Tom offers: "We're here to support each other and help out where we can. This is not a competition!"

"We all know that standing together works better," David says. "We try to listen to each other and offer suggestions."

"We have enough diverse interests and education," Craig chimes in, "so that we aren't stumbling over each other."

Each son has found his own niche. Eldest son David primarily works with the livestock. He oversees feeding and nutrition, breeding, moving, gathering and shipping. The seasons dictate where the cattle are. They winter on public lands, but are brought onto subirrigated pastures in the spring. Then they're moved to other pastures or the feedlot to gain weight. When the steers reach 850 pounds, they're shipped.

Craig keeps the crop machinery, irrigation systems and other things working. He makes sure cattle have water in winter, irrigation diversions on Baker and Lehman creeks are operating properly, pivots are serviced, and equipment is functioning. A harvester or bailer down for a day may cause the lessening of a crop's value because of harvesting conditions. "Look at Craig's hands!" David says. "They look like they've spent a lifetime in grease and dirt." Craig also knows most about the ranches' water rights.

Tom, the youngest, supervises the planting and marketing of crops, including corn, barley, alfalfa, and silage production that supports their cattle operation. Many of their fields grow pasture for cattle, but others mix alfalfa and grasses for horses, or become mono-crops for alfalfa, barley or corn. Tom monitors soil and plant moisture carefully to ensure harvesting at the plants' highest nutritional levels, which generally draw the highest market prices.

Dean, when he's ranching, does the crop dusting and some air applications of fertilizer and weed suppressors. He's been flying for more than 50 years, soloing at age 16. He attributes his life to "flying carefully and slowly" and says, "You have to know your plane thoroughly and...have complete focus on your task and any obstacles." Dean may be working on life number 14 out of the traditional nine. He's avoided power lines, trees, equipment in the fields, pivots and more, but has hit a buck and herd of does emerging from the corn to cross his takeoff. He survived, but the wing and propeller sustained



*ABOVE: Dean Baker contemplates the future of water and Baker Ranches in Snake Valley, Nev.*

*BELOW: The Clay homestead, settled in the mid-1800s before Nevada became a state. It is near Burbank Meadows where Native Americans and ranchers have used water (vested rights) for irrigation since before the Nevada State Engineer's office was established. Newspapers lining the interior walls date to 1892.*

*OPPOSITE: Looking north across subirrigated meadows, irrigated pasture and alfalfa fields known as Baker Ranch in Snake Valley on the Nevada-Utah border. These meadows will dry up if SNWA is granted rights to pump water nearby.*





*The Bakers' morning meeting, from left: Craig, Dean, David and Tom discuss daily activities and operational decisions. BELOW: Dean at Carl's Spring, named after his late brother. They developed this spring together and Dean calls it "taking advantage of an opportunity."*

serious damage. Farming and ranching are not without accidents and health issues. He has recovered from more than a few.

Dean also helps establish pivots for new fields. The Bakers plant what will most benefit the overall ranching operation. They understand that they must put their water to "beneficial use" as required under both Utah and Nevada water law. However, the state engineer limits how much water can be applied to an acre based on consumptive use in the area. "Efficiency and sufficiency are keys to a successful pasture," Dean stresses, "but you can't leave out the soil, either."

How they integrate each niche is complex and requires good communication skills at

the morning meeting. Timing is everything in cutting hay, shipping cattle, preventing ditch blowouts, attending laboring cows, or watching for pipe deliveries. The Bakers manage their ranches as well as their personal and community lives with professionalism and very positive attitudes.

In addition to Dean's job as spokesperson for Baker Ranches and the Great Basin Water Network, each son takes on community responsibility for the Baker Volunteer Fire Department, the Baker General Improvement District—which supplies water and sewer for the town of Baker, Nev., and no, it was not named after this family of Bakers—the local FFA, cattlemen's association and so

much more. And all emphasize that they could not do their work without the full support of their wives and families.

Tom's wife Janille is the bookkeeper for the ranch and other volunteer groups in Snake Valley. David's wife Tana is employed as a surgical nurse, while Craig's wife Gretchen is a biologist for Great Basin National Park. She has been identifying new water-dependent species living in Lehman and other carbonate caves within the park while co-chairing the Snake Valley Festival, a hometown fund-raising event to help fight the "water grab." All the children have families. As daughter Chris says, "It's a great place to grow up."

Dean's wife Barbara says she just gets out of the way, but she's extremely tolerant of his frequent trips away from home and all the visitors who come to take his tour of Snake Valley to learn about the impacts of SNWA's proposed water withdrawals. Dean shows visitors, legislators, international media and movie makers how his own groundwater pumping has dried up springs in the area. He bluntly states: "There is no excess water in this valley. We're using it, sometimes to our own detriment." He fears that SNWA's withdrawals will have huge impacts on his ability to ranch by drawing down the water table so far that they'll dry up the wet meadows and springs.

Gary Perea, a "stepson" of Dean's and also a White Pine County commissioner, calls Dean "a leader and one of the best things to happen to our larger community.... Money is not the measure of success of a man or woman. It's in the things they accomplish, not by spending money, but by what they contribute in service." Gary thinks that with or without SNWA's water project, water will always be contentious. Snake and Spring valleys are microcosms of other larger water issues.

Rose Strickland, a member of Sierra Club and the Great Basin Water Network, declares, "I've learned more about public land and private ranching from Dean Baker than anyone else." While they have their differences, Rose and Dean and many others with diverse and distinct opinions work closely together on behalf of the network, which has provided funding and expertise to help rural communities participate in the administrative law process related to the granting of water rights. Nevada Rangeland Resources Commission, Sierra Club, counties, Indian tribes and Baker Ranches have





*View of Snake Valley and Baker Ranch pivots from Baker Creek within Great Basin National Park (which will also be affected by SNWA's water-pumping schemes).*

*BELOW: David Baker and daughter Kori herd cows and calves to spring pastures.*



all ponied up funds to make it work.

The test of working together culminates in the Nevada state engineer's hearings. Jason King will hold official hearings on SNWA's groundwater applications in Spring, Cave, Dry Lake and Delamar valleys beginning in September 2011. He will not hear Snake Valley applications until later, but groundwater in Spring Valley also flows into Snake Valley. This means that water pumped south to Las Vegas from Spring Valley will most likely diminish the amount of water that flows to Snake Valley where the Baker Ranches are

using their certificated water. "The groundwater in the valleys is connected," Dean says. "It knows few physical and no political boundaries. The results of pumping will be catastrophic."

So how did Baker Ranches reach this pinnacle of leadership in ranching and the water world? Dean says it all started with his dad's sheep. His dad worked haying around Delta, Utah, and Baker, Nev. He was given sheep as payment in part for his services. He drove them from Silver Creek, Nev., to Delta on foot to raise over the winter. He saved money

and bought the Silver Creek Ranch in 1954, and flew planes for Delta-Aero Flying Service, which was one of the first agricultural service operations in Utah. He flew people, but did no spraying in those days.

"Dad was a successful rancher, starting with quality alfalfa seed and sheep in the early days," says Dean. "Sheep were the origins of our livestock."

But Dean's sheep went away one weekend while he was off on a trip. When he returned home, the boys had gathered and shipped them all. Cattle had become the marketable mainstay. Dean supposes it was a good move, but "sheep have been a part of my life, financing my first car, educating me, and providing seed money for extras. I kind of wish they still were," he says wistfully. The boys think maybe it should have been done differently, but hindsight is the perfect science.

Gradually over the years some neighbors who saw Baker Ranches as successful and fair, sold their smaller, not-so-profitable places to Baker Ranches. Dean says he's tried hard to keep business as business, and neighbors as neighbors.

"I hate to see people who have worked hard sell out," he says. "You don't want to burn bridges with anyone. These are people whose families came to Snake Valley in the 1860s and settled. They built homes, raised their families, irrigated the land, and grazed their livestock here too." The walls of disintegrating homes in Snake Valley are lined with newspapers dating back to the 1890s, evidence of over 100 years of occupancy, and useful information to prove these lands have vested water rights.

Dean is a passionate producer. He loves making things grow: crops, animals, productive lands, and human relationships. Tom acknowledges that "we're not known for our rollicking humor," but occasionally their quiet humor slips out in a grin, an offhand remark, or their sun-crinkled, sparkling clear eyes. Would they sell their ranches and water for money? The answer is unanimously and unequivocally NO!

"We voted on that question once in the past and we've never looked back," says Dean. "We're optimists." Dean is not religious, but he believes in the Ten Commandments so his counsel back to his family and community is: "Do the right thing!"

*Susan Lynn lives in Reno, Nev., and is a coordinator for Great Basin Water Network. For more info, check [www.greatbasinwater.net](http://www.greatbasinwater.net).*