



International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF): April Spotlight

Developed by the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB)

By Karley Williams

Barb Cooksley | *A Life Rooted in the Sandhills and Led by Stewardship*

As the world continues celebrating 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF), the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) is proud to shine a light on the women whose leadership strengthens the U.S. beef industry each day. This month, we are honored to highlight Barb Cooksley, a Nebraska Sandhills rancher whose story reflects six generations of stewardship and an unwavering commitment to the grasslands she calls home.

Growing Up in the Sandhills

Barb's story begins in southwest Nebraska, where she grew up on a cow-calf operation with her parents and two older sisters.

"We were the ranch crew," she said, laughing. "We did everything – rode horses, worked cattle, hunted, fished – even ran machinery."

Barb knew early on that no matter what she ended up doing, she would stay outdoors. After high school, she attended the University of Nebraska, earning both her bachelor's and master's degrees in agronomy and range science. She soon began a career with the Soil Conservation Service, which is now the Natural Resources Conservation Service, working across Nebraska on rangeland conservation.

Marriage and family brought a new season, and Barb stepped away from full-time agency work to become a ranch wife and mom. When her daughter started school, she became a congressional agricultural staffer, spending nine years supporting two U.S. Representatives while staying active in Nebraska Cattlemen, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and more.

Today, Barb draws on her diverse experience and her deep roots on the land to guide every decision she makes on the Cooksley Ranch.

Life on the Ranch

When asked what a typical day looks like, Barb laughed out loud.

"Typical? "No two days are the same," she says. "You always have a plan, but the plan changes."

At any moment, a phone call may change everything. A downed fence, cattle out, an equipment breakdown, or wildfire could instantly redirect the day's priorities.

Barb says she often ends up as "the gopher," driving 15 to 100 miles for parts, supplies, or whatever else is needed at the time. She also handles pasture checks, livestock management, and weed control, along with daily logistics.

"Whatever has to be done, gets done," she says. "And whatever should be done, we'll get to it."

Family, Community & the Journey to "Little Miss Clearcut"

Barb and her husband, George, are now the fourth generation on the ranch. The fifth and sixth generations are already involved, which is a major point of pride for her.

She shared that this, the cycle of life on the ranch, is what brings her the deepest joy.

"There's a moment every year, when that first calf drops and it gets up. The mama licks it off, and the next day it's bouncing around. That's the wow moment. That's why we're here," she explains.

In addition to her love for life on the ranch, Barb places a deep value on the people who surround it.

"Your community is your extended family," she says.

Whether at church, the hardware store or the grocery store, neighbors visit and help each other.

"We're each other's news reporters," she smiles. "If you're not involved, you don't know what's going on."

That close-knit community doesn't just share stories. It also shares in responsibility for the land.

Nearly 40 years on the ranch has sharpened Barb's eye for change. One of the most significant decisions she made was confronting Eastern red cedar encroachment – trees that can quickly overtake native grasslands, reducing forage and water supply, and increasing wildfire risk.

"These are treeless, grass-covered sand dunes," she says, referencing the Sandhills. "You start seeing cedars pop up, you cut them."

Barb took it upon herself to become the ranch's leading cedar-removal specialist, partnering with neighbors and university educators to protect the region. Her dedication earned her a nickname she's proud of: "Little Miss Clearcut."

She also serves as the certified pesticide applicator for the ranch, ensuring they respond quickly and responsibly to thistles or other invasive species.

A Lesson in Patience

When asked about her biggest challenge as a producer, Barb's answer is both honest and heartfelt.

"Aging," she says simply.

"Years of ranch work takes a toll," she says. "You keep doing things, but you do them differently."

She speaks openly about being patient with herself and teaching younger crew members how to work smarter, not harder.

Still, her joy for ranch work remains. Through long days, Barb leans on three things: faith, family and friendships.

"Once you realize you don't have control over it, it's your faith," she says. "God gives you strength. He gives you the people around you."

Her motivation grows from a genuine desire to care for the operation and the people who share in the work.

For those dreaming of a life in agriculture, her advice is simple.

- Be passionate. Love what you do.
- Find your strengths and build on them.
- Know your weaknesses and surround yourself with people who complement them.

Lessons Without Words

For Barb, taking the time to pause has always been important.

"Sometimes you just stop," she says, alluding to the sights around the Sandhills. "You don't capture it on your phone. You just take it in."

When she gives ranch tours, she often turns off the vehicle and waits quietly to see if visitors notice the beauty and serene environment like she does. Most do, and the moment becomes theirs too.

"You're here to work, but you're also here to enjoy it," she says.

At the heart of the Cooksley operation is love – for the land, the livestock, and the people who make it all possible... family.

“You want to love the people you work with,” she says. “Because you’re going to disagree, sometimes loudly. But in the end, you know they’d sacrifice themselves for you, and you’d do the same for them.”

That sense of unity defines the ranch and ensures the legacy continues.

Continuing the Story

Through her leadership and her generosity of spirit, Barb Cooksley’s story reflects the heart of the Nebraska Sandhills and the values that sustain it: resilience, faith, family and a deep respect for the land.

As the International Year of the Woman Farmer continues, USRSB is proud to honor women like Barb who ensure the story of agriculture remains one purpose.

Learn more about sustainable beef and producer leadership by visiting the [U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef](#).