

## **Cattle rustler convicted in Kamloops starved cows to cover up theft: Rancher**

KAMLOOPS - Ranch hand Jason John McDowell was sentenced in Kamloops earlier this month for defrauding his Cache Creek employer and stealing cows from an Alberta ranch owner. But somehow the sentencing judge never heard half the most damning allegations: He didn't just sell his boss's cattle, he nearly starved off his entire herd to cover his tracks.

Last month, Kamloops Provincial Court Judge Roy Dickey sentenced McDowell to 18 months in jail after he pleaded guilty to charges on two separate files. The first was for two charges of theft after he stole items and furniture from the Cache Creek Natural Beef company where he worked as an employee and stealing ten cows belonging to Walter Suntjens, his employer at a ranch in Hanna, Alta. McDowell was also ordered to pay around \$30,000 in restitution to the rancher in Cache Creek and to the buyer he sold Suntjens' cattle to through Kijiji.

Reached at his ranch, Suntjens says he can't figure out why Dickey didn't get the whole story. He's out \$150,000 to \$200,000, nearly lost all his cattle and had to sell sections of land to make up the losses.

"It's just ridiculous. It pays to be a crook. Be a crook; don't work hard all your life," Suntjens says. "A year and a half in jail is pretty good days per dollar. I just have to warn people if (McDowell) works for you, he will steal from you. He's just a natural born thief. He can't help it. It's almost not his fault; he's just made that way."

Shortly before his 2015 charges in Hanna, McDowell worked as a ranch hand for the Cache Creek Natural Beef company the summer of 2014. But after racking up the company credit card, he and his wife along with their six children departed the farm taking all the furnishings supplied in the ranch house with them.

<http://infotel.ca/newsitem/rustler-ranch-hand-starved-cattle-to-cover-up-theft-farm-own>

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Suntjens says he was desperate for help on his ranch before he hired McDowell who responded to his online ad. After a quick phone call to his references, Suntjens says he paid the \$6,000 to move McDowell, his wife Kelly and their five kids from B.C. to live in the property's ranch house.

"You need farm help so desperately. I phoned the references and they didn't do much. I'm a trusting person. Until I have reason not to, I just trust people, as most ranchers do," Suntjens says. "(McDowell) worked great. He was a great mechanic; he could do anything. He could have had a very secure place to live and work here."

But McDowell and Suntjens' security changed when the ranch-owner and his wife took a trip to California in February 2015. Suntjens said he regularly texted McDowell while away and was reassured all was well back home.

"He knew where I was. I would text him every day or every other day and it was always 'fine, things couldn't be better, everything's working great,'" Suntjens said.

### "I'M HAPPY HE WAS CAUGHT, BUT DISAPPOINTED WITH THE SENTENCE"

The farmer says he didn't expect what happened next. Upon his return to Hanna, he says he discovered a nasty note from McDowell, broken tractors, a house full of muddy footprints, an empty toolshed, countless missing items, hundreds more kilometres on his pickup truck and a herd of starving cattle.

"They were starved. He left them for two weeks without water and he didn't feed them. When I came home, we went right into rescue mode to save the herd and we still lost 12 cows that starved to death," Suntjens says.

Beyond the 12 pregnant cows he destroyed, Suntjens says he tallied the amount left in his field and discovered 50 cows and 20 yearlings were missing. However, after his call to the RCMP, he says he never heard back from the Hanna detachment and credits the investigation to an undercover officer who specializes in livestock cases.

"Until the livestock police got involved, I'm sure I never would have recovered the cattle. I never had anyone come out and check it out. Never heard one word," he says.

The undercover eventually discovered McDowell sold ten cows to 18-year-old Colton Sather via Kijiji. Suntjens says the young man took out a \$20,000 loan to pay the con-man who traded him Suntjens' cows.

After he was confronted by the police, McDowell said he didn't steal any cattle and suggested the missing cows were likely dead from malnutrition. He accused Suntjens of not taking care of his livestock. Suntjens believes his cattle were starved to coincide with McDowell's story.

Once the case made it to court, Dickey ordered McDowell to pay the \$20,000 back in restitution, but Suntjens wasn't named in the restitution order. McDowell pleaded guilty to stealing ten cows, but any additional cattle were not named in the case information.

"When (Sather's) paid back, I'll feel better. That was my main concern. He was the key to cracking the case. As far as the rest of the stuff, I'll get over it," Suntjens says. "I'm happy he was caught but I'm disappointed with the sentence. If he would have stole that much from a bank he would have got 15 years in jail."

While the ten cows were returned, Suntjens says there are still 30 cows and 20 yearlings unaccounted for. He says the undercover officer has some clues for where they are, but is still collecting evidence. He says the officer returned a number of stolen items back after recovering them from a barn cache in Spedden, Alta.

### A WANTED MAN

To pay for the losses, Suntjens says he sold six parcels of land on his property. He says he might proceed with a civil suit against McDowell who remains in jail serving his sentence.

He is offering a \$5,000 reward for any information leading to the recovery of the missing cattle. The brand for the cows is:

— W5 on the right rib.

The yearling brand is the number 5 over the letter W on the left hip.

Dickey only heard a portion of Suntjens' story in Kamloops court. Suntjens says Crown officials in Alberta were made aware of the total losses along with Hanna RCMP. The information could have been lost when the file was transferred to B.C. or there may have not been enough evidence to lay additional charges. But whether or not Suntjens will receive compensation for the damage he alleges, remains to be seen.

If you have any information regarding the missing cattle, contact Hanna RCMP at [\(403\) 854-3393](tel:403-854-3393). McDowell also has warrants for his arrest in Brandon, Manitoba for four counts of fraud.

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