



Arizona Farm Bureau Federation

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## ***Meet a Momma Bear on the Border***

***By Julie Murphree, Arizona Farm Bureau Outreach Director***



*Micaela McGibbon chose the ranching lifestyle. She and her husband, Drew, could live down the hill where it's safer. But, managing her herd of registered Red Angus cattle and wanting the children to experience ranch life means they'll stand their ground and make life as normal as possible near the southern Arizona border.*

Arizona Farm Bureau members in leadership on the county level, Drew and Micaela McGibbon's four children are all involved in some form or another on the ranch.

### ***Lions, Tigers, and Bears ... and Border Crossers, Oh My***

It's rough land out in southern Arizona. The McGibbons' Santa Rita Ranch butts up against the beautiful Santa Rita Mountain range. Besides the occasional rattlesnake, they often must defend against mountain lions and bears. And that should be enough for any family to contend with in terms of threats to life and limb on the ranch. But the unfortunate reality, for the McGibbons and other southern border ranchers, is that their more frequent encounter is with groups of illegal border crossers.

As dedicated as they are to protecting their ranch, illegal activity at the border means that Drew and Micaela must be even more vigilant as parents to protect their family.

"We average a sighting a week," says Micaela McGibbon, referring to groups of border crossers ranging in age from two to 40. "So, as a family, we're conscientious about the dangers we face." Micaela's epiphany moment about the level of risk they regularly face came when their oldest was three. "We were in the supply yard when a group crossing the desert began to approach us. The only thing that prevented them from coming closer was our dogs."



Since then, the family is never without their dogs, and they've implemented a number of other protocols and tools that they always have at the ready to keep their family safe. And the dogs do go off. In fact, it always puts the family on high alert, especially since the dogs have different tones. "We've come to recognize their tone when it's a group of [border crossers]," says Micaela. "Some of our dogs have been beaten by them so the dogs themselves have come to recognize the three-days-in-the-desert smell which puts the dogs in a rampage. Their primary job is to keep us safe. That's what we rely on. They are our eyes and ears when our backs are turned."

In addition to the canine protectors, Micaela also carries a firearm. "I'm not out to get anything, just protecting," she says. "These groups are carrying automatic rifles so immediately they're much better armed." The family also always reports where they will be, how long they'll be gone and their expected return to home base. Plus, Drew and Micaela never allow the children to be without adult supervision even on their own place.



Because of their unique role and perspective as southern Arizona ranchers, the McGibbons see clear options on how to resolve current challenges. "Enforce the border at the border," says Drew. He and Micaela also agree that "more boots on the ground at the border" truly means more boots; not manpower sent to push administrative

paperwork paper. Proof of the effectiveness of this strategy was readily apparent when the National Guard began to conduct training drills near the border. When the National Guard conducted exercises nearby, it became an automatic deterrent for illegal crossings in those areas, and the McGibbons saw a significant decrease in activity on their ranch as a result.

Micaela never imagined her role as a mom would have her on this level of safety alert. “When I was growing up my mom would tell us ‘there’s the door and I don’t want to see you until I ring the dinner bell.’ We went out, helped Dad, rode horseback, whatever.” But when she and other ranch families started finding stashes of guns hidden in dry washes on their properties, they realized the border situation had escalated to the point where it was becoming a threat to the safety of the ones they love the most. More than one ranch family’s fatalistic question now becomes, “When will we be caught in the crossfire?”

**Editor’s Note:** *First published in October 2010 in our monthly [Arizona Agriculture](#), This Momma Bear on the Border story was updated in 2019, and again in 2021*