



Monday, January 26, 1998

Your local farm and ranch newspaper

Vol. 19 No. 4

Program helps producers expand operational horizons

BOISE, Idaho - Doing things right does not mean doing the right things.

Third-generation cattle producer Roy Dunford asked himself that question last year in Idaho Falls, when he attended a meeting of Wyoming's touted "Western Integrated Ranch/Farm Education" program.

Returning to the ranch he runs in Montpelier, Dunford established rotational grazing plans, began fertilizing range as well as croplands and divided the cattle operation into three separate enterprises — yearlings, cow-calf and hay.

That gives him "a little more of an idea which was making money and which was losing money."

Farm management specialist John Hewlett of the University of Wyoming says that "near as I can tell, in an ag vocabulary, profit is a four-letter word."

But Hewlett hopes that will change with the five-day, team-taught program that in five years has reached more than 400 ranchers and farmers in seven western states and a Canadian province.

Sometimes hesitant to use the word holistic, program developers say it integrates the physical, biological, financial and human resources of agricultural operations. And they say participants should attend in pairs, or teams from each ranch, and not as separate individuals.

"You almost change your vocabulary because of this shift," Hewlett says. "If people take it as a team, they've got everybody pulling for the same goals and speaking the same language."

Supported in part by a sustainable agriculture grant from the federal government, University of Idaho extension faculty bring the program to Idaho livestock operators on Nov. 4 in Montpelier and Jan. 6 in Challis. The intense process involves establishing strategic goals, inventorying resources, exploring possible enterprises, developing enterprise plans and estimating the flow of resources needed to put those plans into effect. Producers will learn how to monitor and adjust the plans they implement.

"We look at the whole operation to identify places that are not paying the bills or places where they have excess labor they could be doing something else with," says Jim Hawkins, the university's extension educator in Custer County.

Ranches might diversify into fee hunting, fee fishing, dude ranches or "maybe they've got a hired man who's got some free time who could open a shop on the outfit to do some custom welding."

Near Devil's Tower, Wyo., fifth-generation rancher Ogden Driskill says the program's training changed what had been a very traditional, cattle operation to one where sheep now control the range weed, leafy spurge, and where "we're constantly looking at different things to do."

"The opportunities to diversify are unlimited for

virtually any ranch," Driskill says. "The hard part is to sort out the ones that are going to be profitable for the future."

Gene Gade, University of Wyoming extension agent in Crook County, says too many ranchers "talk about the lifestyle and get hung up on particular enterprises and don't think as much about the economics as probably they should.

"They say, 'I'm a cowboy, and the only thing that I can do on this ranch is raise calves,'" he says.

But if the goal is to stay on the ranch and to pass it on to their children, the only way they will get there is by making a profit. Gade says after the training, ranchers are "just more methodical about the whole business of analysis, decision-making and planning."

The transformation is seen in the attitude toward wildlife.

"Some of our ranchers have viewed wildlife in the past as a nuisance, something to be got rid of, something that ate your hay," Gade says. "More and more of them are using wildlife as a resource — even for profit — and that's quite a shift in thinking."

Because the training helps ranchers identify limitations and determine precisely how change will affect demand on resources, it eases risk management, says University of Idaho extension agent Joel Packham in Bear Lake County. And with cattle prices on the rebound, experts think now is a good time to explore risks and to make the changes that will help ranches weather the next cyclical downturn.

"People who are in control of their business know they can't predict with certainty what's going to happen, but they have a general plan of where they're going to go," says agricultural economist Wilson Gray at the University of Idaho extension center in Twin Falls.

"If things change, they adapt and go on toward their goal," Wilson says. "They're among the few who are still making \$50 a head at the bottom of the price cycle."