



Outside the Box

by **TOM FIELD**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

A sense of place

Colorado has been home to my family for more than 125 years. Occasionally, I find myself wondering what drew my great-great-grandparents to this particular piece of the earth. At the same time, I have contemplated how they might view the current condition of my native state.

Like so many places in the U.S., the vast majority of Colorado's citizens reside in an urban and suburban setting — in Colorado's case, a couple-hundred-mile-long-strip, 20 miles wide, that runs south from Fort Collins to the old steel mills of Pueblo.

Beyond the urban corridor to the east lies the western edge of the Great Plains, to the south the farmland of the Arkansas valley, to the southwest the Spanish land grants of the San Luis Valley, and to the west the high country and high desert where federal lands dominate the landscape and competition for use of these lands is contested on economic, political and cultural issues.

Our ranch lies some 200 miles southwest of Denver, and I marvel

how my attitude changes when I crest Monarch Pass and begin to descend into the western watersheds of the Gunnison Valley. The stress falls away, my foot lightens on the accelerator, more attention is given to the sky and the horizon, and the colors of the passing landscape come into a clearer focus.

Somehow life is more complete when we sink roots into a place instead of just passing through — when we take time to build a family and a community. Agriculture provides people the unique opportunity to combine work, family, profession and community into their daily experience. As such, it is an exercise in hope.

What clouds may bring

Wyoming rancher Bob Budd describes ranching as “an understanding — an acceptance that clouds bring many things: rain and snow, fire and wind, and false hope. But clouds carry shade from the hot sun. And children on horses watch clouds, describe them, see wind miles over their

heads, and grow from tiny horsemen to fighter pilots in an instant. Clouds can carry frustration and they can carry hope. Sometimes both come out of the same clouds.”

Increasingly, cattle producers find themselves living with one foot in each of two very different experiences — one bound by place, geography, climate, animals and culture, and the other a world of societal expectations, consumer wants and needs, and the complexity of policy and politics.

Each of these dimensions has its own form of chaos and uncertainty, but the latter creates far more stress on those who have chosen agriculture as their passion. Somehow the possibility of drought or a blizzard seems less ominous than the tethers created by governmentally imposed regulations. The challenges of calving season seem much more manageable than the process of communicating with consumers.

Given my druthers, I would rather spend my time in the midst of a natural landscape complete with all of its challenges than to deal with the whims of politicians and consumer activists. But fate has not afforded us such luxury. Instead we must deal with both realms and the unknowns associated with each. We will never be able to fully enjoy the unique places that sustain us unless we learn to effectively deal with our role in the greater society and to advocate for our lifestyle.

Do actions speak louder than words?

The challenge for our industry is that for the most part we would rather be engaged in getting something done that relates directly to the function of our ranch as opposed to using our time to make the case for ranching as an economic engine, a cultural and community resource, and as a benefit to the environment. Most cattle producers subscribe to the notion that “actions speak much louder than words.” Unfortunately, our future may lie in our ability to effectively communicate the multifaceted values of beef production to the greater society.

I think our ability to effectively communicate is complicated by a multitude of factors, many of which are to some degree self-inflicted. For starters, most of us just aren't very patient with anyone who doesn't understand what we do, how we do it and why we do it. This impatience, unfortunately, is often misread as stubbornness and resistance to new perspectives.

We tend to approach most questions from folks outside our daily community with a defensive or combative attitude. Furthermore, we tend to play most things close to the vest as if sharing our vision for our land, families and communities might somehow be used against us. This is particularly unfortunate, as the best of our convictions — leaving a place better than we found it; staying until the job is done; being a good neighbor; and enjoying the wonder of family, children, livestock and God's handiwork — aren't things we are typically comfortable sharing with outsiders.

It is easier to talk about the weather, calf prices and the cost of tractor parts than it is to engage in conversations about the beauty of the landscape and the intricacies of balancing family, finances and quality of life with the ever-present risks inherent in cattle production, and the spiritual and emotional ties that we feel toward the land we call home. However, we owe it to the next generation to build the bridges that help others to appreciate farming and ranching.

Page Lambert, a Wyoming rancher, asks important questions: “Who will be the caretakers of the future if there is no one left to remember the land as she once was? What tradition will guide us into the next century?”

There are details of ranching and cow-calf production that require our constant attention, but if we are to find answers to Page's questions, we may well have to spend some time looking to the clouds to find the hope and the messages that will help us to assure that “the sense of place” isn't lost from humankind's experience.

So, take a few minutes in the midst of this season of harvest and weaning to gather the family together and look upwards for the inspiration that will help you to advocate for agriculture, community-building and the beauty of finding a place on this planet to sink our roots.



Editor's Note: Tom Field is a professor at the Colorado State University (CSU) Department of Animal Sciences, where he is responsible for the seedstock cattle breeding program of the university teaching herd, composed of Angus and Hereford cattle. He directs the Seedstock Merchandising Team and teaches Food Animal Sciences, Beef Production and Family Ranching. He is a contributor to the research efforts of the CSU Beef-Tec program. A frequent speaker at beef cattle events in the United States and internationally, Field is also a partner in his family's commercial cow-calf enterprise, which uses Angus as an important genetic component.