

# Outside the Box: Sorting

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Autumn in the high country is a remarkable time of year as the glory of God's creation is revealed when the Aspens turn golden, frost adorns the early morning landscape, and the efforts of our ranch family are measured in the bounty of a newly weaned set of calves.

I find solace in the sorting alley as our team quietly sorts the cows from their calves, chooses the next set of replacement heifers, and processes feeder calves in preparation for delivery to our buyers. As the day warms, the smell of cattle, horses, hay and soil

merges into a natural bouquet that brings forth memories of the 50-plus calf crops weaned in my lifetime and the footprints of my Dad and our friend Jake — both taken far too early.

I remember my father, who spent his last years slowed by respiratory disease but still horseback — his oxygen bottle secure in a specially designed set of saddlebags. He held court at his kitchen counter each morning with the young ranchers of our valley before they ventured out to feed a nation; he fed hay in the winter, and was present at branding, weaning and shipping.

I feel Jake's presence in the alley. He grew up on our ranch, and he never ceased to amaze us with his knowledge of every cow, season and activity. As the quiet timeless waltz of sorting continues, it is comforting to have Jake's dad on the gate and my wife and son providing a steady, gentle stream of cattle into the alley. It is a peaceful time.

## These days

But late that afternoon as I walked through the newest set of replacements chosen to sustain our business and the families it supports, my mind was troubled by the difficulties of our times. I know all too well that the wolves circle our industry, picking at the edges and eager to take advantage of any weakness and to separate us from the land and our livelihoods. The activists, regulators, and power brokers worry me. But the gorilla in the room of gravest concern is the reality that increasingly we expend our precious energy, time and talent on industry in-fighting. As a cattleman recently pointed out to me, "we have circled the wagons and are shooting inward." Perhaps Pogo was right — "we have met the enemy, and he is us."

To be sure, the stress faced by our nation, communities, businesses and families is all too real, and the economic, political and social crises that confront us will not be easily resolved. But our response to the stress, if not carefully crafted, has the potential to undermine the longevity of our industry on three fronts:

1. We will demoralize subsequent generations of beef producers if our lack of unity and commitment to thoughtful debate causes our young people to doubt the ability of the industry to work toward common goals. If our squabbling results in business models that restrict rather than enhance the ability to grow wealth and professional mastery, then the next generation will look elsewhere.
2. The finger-pointing and resulting mixed messages from our industry only serve to empower regulators and politicians to go their own way in the absence of clear

industry direction and signals. The agricultural community has less voting power with each passing year, and our divisiveness only weakens us further.

3. Lastly, internal conflict diverts our limited resources of time and money away from the activities and efforts with true potential to improve beef demand and enhance the business environment.

### Landmarks that last

My Dad taught us to ease up and never crowd the herd as we moved through a gate, to think about the consequences of our actions, and to look to the horizon for familiar landmarks when we had lost our way. As the heifers filed by bawling but slowly settling towards a bunk filled with fresh hay, I couldn't help but wonder if our industry had lost sight of those principles.

What will it take to regain our sense of direction and purpose? From my vantage point, there are seven landmarks that can help guide our actions:

1. Free enterprise is the most desirable economic model.
2. Market access and the opportunity to meet the needs of markets is the best path to long-term economic health.
3. Private ownership of land and resources is fundamental to a free society.
4. The opportunity to transfer our businesses to the next generation without undue taxation is fundamental to long-term food security and rural community sustainability.
5. Excessive governmental involvement is in direct opposition to maintaining a flexible, resilient and profitable business.
6. Access to technology, information and intellectual capital is important to improving agricultural productivity and sustainability.
7. A viable beef industry depends on the freedom for producers to choose from a host of production practices and management protocols, and for consumers to have access to a variety of beef products.

My instinct tells me that Dad and Jake would tell us to look to the horizon and to trust in and defend these core principles to ensure that the next generation can find fulfillment as beef producers.

