

## The 21st Century Ranch

In the early 1990s a small number of ranchers across the nation joined a steady stream of family farmers and others in “opting out” of agriculture’s business-as-usual paradigm. At first that meant managing livestock differently. Instead of continuous, largely unmanaged grazing, these ranchers bunched their cattle up and planned moves in an attempt to mimic the herding behavior of wild herbivores.

In 1997 The Quivira Coalition coined the term “The New Ranch” to describe this emerging progressive ranching movement and originally defined it as follows: The New Ranch operates on the principle that the natural processes that sustain wildlife habitat, biological diversity, and functioning watersheds are the same processes that make land productive for livestock.

Initially, what distinguished these ranches was the use of planned grazing and goal-setting principles. Over time, however, the definition grew to encompass a variety of innovative social, ecological, and economic approaches to land management. These included:

- use of livestock creatively to restore and maintain ecological services, such as the employment of goats and cattle to reduce noxious weeds;
- the rise of watershed-based, multiple-stakeholder, collaborative organizations, often rancher-led;
- productive partnerships with conservation organizations;
- the adoption of low-stress livestock management principles,

which often form the foundation to successful herding;

- experimentation with grass banks and other innovative ideas;
- formation of rancher-led statewide land trusts; and
- mobilization of the “radical center” in an effort to find common ground with a wide variety of concerned citizens.

But the movement did not stop there. Today, “opting out” has accelerated in new ways that include:

- “decommodification” of many ranch enterprises, including a shift to natural, organic, and grass-fed meat enterprises;
- direct marketing of local food products to urban consumers, often through farmer’s markets;
- diversification of a ranch’s income sources, including recreational businesses and formation of nonprofit organizations;
- shortening the “food miles” traveled by ranch products; and
- exploration of the nexus of ecology and agriculture, where ranchers act like conservationists and conservationists act like ranchers.

It is this last point that defines The New Ranch today. Although these are hopeful developments, they remain small in scale and rather widely dispersed. Partly, this is a result of social, political, and economic (policy) obstacles that remain in their way. A shortage of slaughterhouses and the inspectors needed to certify them, for instance, has severely crimped the ability of ranchers to deliver grass-

fed beef to local markets in some areas, thus depriving them of potentially higher profits. This cuts to the core of the issue: the primary challenge to ranchers today is profitability. The commodity value of livestock has not kept pace with the rising costs of production, especially fuel. A typical ranch’s “profits”—always thin—have largely evaporated in recent years, which is one reason more ranchers are turning to niche markets, alternate business activities, and day jobs in town.

I recently visited a family ranch that seemed to be doing all the right things. Their cattle are progressively managed; the land is healthy, productive, and biologically diverse; they produce a variety of agricultural goods; they are exploring niche markets for their grass-fed beef; they are active in the community and local politics; and perhaps most importantly, the children are staying and planning to take over the ranch. But when I politely inquired about the ranch’s financial shape I learned that all was not well. Costs keep rising, niche markets are small and distant, and new skill sets are hard to develop quickly enough. The future was in some doubt. As I drove away, I thought, this is exactly the sort of ranch that this nation needs to save. We need its food, its good stewardship, its strong sense of community and family values—and its leadership.

What started 20 years ago as a grassroots movement—meaning an effort to go back to the grass and the roots—is now poised for bigger things. But it has to be profitable.

If society values healthy food, sustainable practices, local production, decreased carbon footprints, and increased ecosystem services, then it must find a way to compensate ranchers for these important activities. We are not there yet.

We need a 50-year vision for our country's ranchland and ranch families. We need ranches because we need the open space they provide, we need their locally-grown food, and we need the good stewardship they can provide. And over the next

50 years, we will need more ranches, not less.

**Courtney White**

The Quivira Coalition, 1413 Second Street, Suite #1, Santa Fe, NM 87505, U.S.A., email [executive@quiviracoalition.org](mailto:executive@quiviracoalition.org)

