

The Mindset to Change Ken Conley

Ranching in the Intermountain West can be a tough business. Variations in precipitation from year to year can result in highly variable range conditions making it extremely difficult to produce a consistent calf crop. Some ranching operations have much better range resources at their disposal than others. I suppose that is one of the secrets to success of the truly great ranches in the west—great resources. I think an even greater secret to their success is how they manage those resources to benefit all aspects of their operation. We've all seen the good ranches; the animals always seem to be fat and happy; the employees are happy too; the range resource is healthy. Likewise, we've also seen the marginal operations. As manager of the Gund Ranch for 24 years I've had experience with a marginal operation. The range resource is limited; the terrain is steep and rough with limited water; eight inches of average annual precipitation and average never seems to happen; it's tough to make things work. The production gains from a few good years of ample rainfall can be wiped out in one year of drought. Rangeland health issues in today's world-- riparian health, wildlife habitat and threatened and endangered species for example-- just add to the difficulties. It is becoming increasingly difficult for all ranchers, especially those with a marginal resource, to conduct business as usual these days. Higher production costs and greater regulation on the public resource increase pressure for change. There is a lot of resistance to change within the ranching community. This is usually a result of change being rammed down our throats by outside interests and we are forced to accept it whether we like it or not. Resistance to change is understandable under these circumstances. Sadly, unless we learn to adapt to these changing times, the livelihood of many ranching operations is in jeopardy. I truly believe that we in the industry need to become more proactive and less reactive toward inevitable change. It's a bitter pill to swallow sometimes but with the right mindset to change I believe we can adapt and ultimately make things better for ourselves. Sometimes the impetus to initiate change is nothing more than the willingness to incorporate things into our operations that we already know to be true but have not applied because of our own apprehensions and limitations.

Throughout my career, I have had associations with a lot of great people. None, however, have been greater than Ron Torell and Wayne Burkhardt. Ron is a close friend and the most knowledgeable person I know about the biology of the cow. I wish I had a nickel for every time Ron and I sat around the table talking theory and dreaming up projects to do at the Gund Ranch that might benefit the ranching industry. We talked of matching forage availability to the biological cycle of the cow-- calving at the onset of green grass to reduce expensive supplemental feed costs, and the importance of green grass to the success of reproduction, especially on a range cattle operation. We talked of the importance of a short calving season and uniformity of the calf crop in today's market. The results of these discussions always seemed to end with my realization that the limitations of the forage resources at my disposal prevented me from practicing these principles. Rough terrain, inadequate range nutrition in July and August, to name a few, were roadblocks that I couldn't overcome. I didn't have the control I needed to employ all of these basic principles. For years I cussed the constraints that the land imposed upon me while I refused to acknowledge the constraints I was imposing upon myself.

Wayne Burkhardt was my supervisor for several years and was very patient with a snot-nosed kid given the task of running a ranch. He went out of his way to make me learn things and figure out problems on my own. Looking back, one of Wayne's greatest attributes was his philosophy on range management. He would feed me tidbits of this philosophy from time to time. He talked about things like natural herbivory where cows "follow the green" up the mountain, allowing grasses at lower elevations to

flower after the grazing animal has moved on. “You shouldn’t have to work for the cows, the cows should work for you, try to find ways to make that happen.” “There are ways to make cows do the right thing besides brute force.” Those are the ones that really stand out in my memory. At a barstool or around a table with friends I would often espouse these philosophies as my own. I remember thinking how great it would be if I could apply these principles to the operation, but the constraints of the ranch resources prevented me from practicing them. So I continued to bust my rear mashing cows to the top of the steep and rocky slopes of the Simpson Park Mountains in August just to have the cows beat me back home. I had little control of the situation because that’s where the cows had to be at that time of the year. I knew the range was marginal at that time of year but I continued to blame it instead of recognizing my own self-imposed constraints. At the time, the bills were getting paid and the ranch was not a financial burden to the College so all in all everything was ok. I was younger then and the work didn’t seem so bad.

I continued doing things in this manner up to and after the massive wildfires of 1999. By 2003, we had endured three years of horrendous drought, greater regulation by the BLM due to riparian concerns and reduced conception rates in the cow herd. That’s when I realized that inadequate nutrition and unhappy cows were leading me down the road to an unsustainable situation. Additionally, I was getting older and becoming very tired of “making things work.” Ranching was supposed to be fun—this wasn’t fun anymore. If I were a private producer in this situation I would truly be on the brink of financial ruin. How could a situation that had been reasonably sustainable for so many years get turned upside down? In trying to find an answer to this question, I realized that the forage resource I was most dependent upon during the critical breeding season, the summer public land allotment, was the one that had the highest degree of variability in terms of forage availability. At some point it hit me like a ton of bricks-- the only real constraints of the operation was my own unwillingness to apply the principles that I had espoused for all those years. The mindset that I had been under for so many years was one of accepting the status quo. When I removed that mental block of “It can’t be done” and evaluated the operation and the management possibilities from a total resource perspective-- both public and private-- an entire world opened up. I was giving little attention to the forage resource of the private land because it was outside the realm of tradition, cows weren’t meant to be on the private land during the summer. From a forage standpoint, an entire resource that would provide reliable and substantive nutrition during the critical time of reproduction was being overlooked—the private land meadows. I really had to shed a lot of baggage to make the change—fear of failure, fear of something new, and fear of what my neighbors might think.

To make a long story a little shorter, by evaluating the ranch from an **entire** forage resource, I was able to construct a grazing plan that included later calving by utilization of private meadows during a later breeding season of July and August. This filled the void of inadequate forage during the breeding season. The BLM agreed to earlier use of the mountain allotment (April-June) to address hot season grazing concerns. The results were very favorable. The cows now calve in synch with green grass. The calving season is reduced to 70 days resulting in a more uniform calf crop. Supplemental winter feed costs have been reduced. Riparian concerns on the public land have been alleviated. The cows, due to the earlier turnout, “follow the green”—it’s now their idea to go to the top of the mountain. The cows are doing a better job of working for the outfit instead of the employees working hard to make the cows work. In a nutshell, matching the entire forage availability of the ranch and the biological cycle of the cow has, in my mind, greatly improved the sustainability and overall bottom line of the operation. This is not to say that a change of this kind is not without its own set of problems that need attention, but overall, it’s a better a situation. It was especially a better situation for me. It enabled me to now look at every grazing situation with an open mind. I am no longer at the Gund Ranch and am now completely

submerged in a private enterprise, but the lessons I learned in the past I will surely apply to my own operation.

I think that one of the most unique things about the Great Basin is the amount of variability in the forage resource. While there is a degree of similarity among ranching operations, every ranch has its own set of resources to manage. The availability and type of forage resource can vary from ranch to ranch within just a few miles. While one set of management principles may work for one ranch, the neighboring ranch may use an entirely different method. I think that evaluating our grazing plan and basing it upon the *entire array* of resource that we have at our disposal, can go along ways toward improving our bottom line, and our state of mind. Applying what we know with an open mind and a “can do” attitude may provide a mindset for positive change, for everyone involved.