



# For Granted

► by **Eric Grant**, API Creative Media manager

## The cleanup hitter

*Will Kennon cut his teeth on the mountains in western Colorado, where he rode the steep, brushy hillsides pushing his dad's cows to higher pastures. From the start, Will dreamt of being little more than a cowboy. Today, he's one of the best there is. His abilities and charismatic personality have made him a popular man in western Colorado.*

### Monitor and measure

What I think people like best about Will is that he's a cleanup hitter. He gives his ranching buddies peace of mind, because they know he'll take care of their problems. When cattle stray on the desert and they're too wild to gather, or if your bull decides to "bach" it and won't come home, Will is the guy to call.

The truth of the matter is that many headaches within the ranching industry are caused by seedstock producers who are too far removed from their problems. And most of these problems — bad dispositions, bad feet and legs, susceptibility to disease and poor doability — should have been addressed through tough and regimented culling decisions years before Will rides on the scene.

About 15 years ago, the U.S. packing industry embraced Total Quality Management (TQM), or Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP). HACCP is a management philosophy that breaks down production systems, identifies specific areas

where problems — such as *E. coli* contamination — can occur, and puts in place mechanisms to prevent problems from happening in the first place.

**When problems make their way to consumers, it's already too late to protect an industry from its economic demise.**

In large part, the HACCP programs initiated by packers themselves have gone a long way in improving the quality, consistency and safety of U.S. beef. Increased consumer beef demand during the last five years is one way the industry has been rewarded for its efforts.

At the same time, cattle producers — particularly seedstock producers — have

been slow in embracing TQM, but soon their industry may depend on it.

### Responsibility

The reality is that most of us just want to raise cattle. We could care less about paperwork. Most of us could give a hoot about keeping production records. We're too far removed from the consumer marketplace to think too much about judicious use of antibiotics. No one really wants to worry too much about culling bad-tempered cattle or

testing for diseases that could spread to our customers' herds.

But ask seedstock producers who have had a problem with Johnne's disease or trichomoniasis and had to face the legal ramifications of these diseases about their experience. The importance of all these things moves to the forefront of our business.

But the ramifications of responsibility extend much further than just your customers these days. The lessons of the spinach industry in late summer 2006 offer a powerful lesson on just how serious an enterprise food production has become. Hundreds were hospitalized. Others died. And lawyers brought class action suits against an entire industry.

In truth, when problems make their way to consumers, it's already too late to protect an industry from its economic demise.

It will take years for the spinach industry to recover. Producers, processors and distributors no doubt will have to change every aspect of their production and distribution practices to survive. The industry itself will look entirely different five years down the road, and those who are unwilling to change will no longer be participants in it.

### Time for ranch TQM

The message for the seedstock business is simple: The U.S. beef industry will be much better off the sooner seedstock producers step up their commitment not only to raising high-quality genetics, but also to producing safe and wholesome products for consumers.

It starts with cattle that are problem-free — structurally sound, free of disease and possessing good dispositions — and continues through the system with effective documentation of production practices so you can monitor your production practices and measure your progress.

Each of us, in our own way, can contribute a great deal to the improvement of our industry and to the strengthening of beef's position in the marketplace. But if we choose to perpetuate problems — and pass them down the line — there aren't enough Will Kennons in the world to head them all off.

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**Editor's Note:** "For Granted" is a monthly column written for the Angus Journal by Angus Production Inc.'s Creative Media manager Eric Grant. The column focuses on marketing beef, the beef industry and seedstock in particular — aspects of the business that are often taken for granted as day-to-day tasks take center stage.