



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

Legacy

One of our neighbors in the Gunnison Valley owns a ranch that has skyrocketed in value due to competing-use pressure from recreation and development. I had asked him, “Why not take the money and find another place away from skiers, mountain bikers and second homes?” His answer was heroically simple: “It has taken me a lifetime to understand this ranch; I don’t have enough time to learn a new one.”

Drawn to the land

Agriculture affords human beings the unique opportunity to forge a connection to a landscape intertwined with work, family, community and culture. These relationships were poetically described and communicated by the storytellers of old. Our modern storytellers who use cinema, novels and music are equally drawn to the compelling nature of our relationship with the landscape.

My favorite film classics have themes centered on the connection between people, their cultures and the land. *Field of Dreams*, *A Walk in the Clouds*, *Heartland*, *Lonesome Dove* and *The Rare Breed* are wonderful stories of people deeply affected by the landscape on which they live and work. These stories reach out to the observer because they reinvestigate our primal roots to the land and remind us that we need more than technology, concrete and steel to thrive.

A passage from *The Sea of Grass*, Conrad Richter’s story of the last days of the open range livestock industry, is an eloquent summation of the love of the grazer for the land:

And that night as I lay in my sleepless bunk staring into the white haze that entered my deep window, I fancied that in the milky mist I could see the prairie as I had seen it all my life and would never see it again, with the grass in summer, sweeping my stirruped thighs and prairie chicken scuttling ahead of my pony; with the ponds in fall, black and noisy with waterfowl; and my uncle’s seventy thousand head of cattle rolling in fat; with the tracks of endless game in the winter snow and thousands of tons of wild hay cured and stored on the stem; and when the sloughs of the home range greened up in the spring, with the scent of warming wet earth and swag after swag catching the emerald fire, and horses shedding and snorting and grunting as they rolled, and everywhere the friendly indescribable solitude of that lost sea of grass.

Those of us who love rural landscapes understand the emotion of Richter’s prose and feel the same sense of loss as development erodes the vistas that brought a sense of peace and place to our parents and grandparents. In the five-year period from 1997 to 2002, Colorado converted 2.5 million acres of agricultural land to other uses. Only Texas and New Mexico lost more

land to development.

By 2022, Colorado is projected to give up another 3.1 million acres of agricultural land, with most of the pressure coming from rural, large-lot development projects. Colorado is not alone in its plight, as nearly every state in the union experiences rapidly rising land values and pasture lease rates.

The loss of open space, wildlife habitat and agricultural land has become an American habit. Beyond the environmental consequences, these changes are affecting community dynamics and eroding the cultures that have valued land for both its aesthetic and functional characteristics. Despite these challenges, rural communities, farm and ranch families, and like-minded partners are finding ways to stem the conversion of meadows to malls, and pastures to planned communities.

Planning ahead

Mark Drabenstott, an economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City and the director of the Center for the Study of Rural America (CSRA), recommends the following eight action items as a means to reinvestigate rural agricultural economies.

1. Find your competitive niche in the global market.
2. Grow the farm team — focus on regional entrepreneurs instead of the costly process of attracting big business.
3. Create clusters of opportunity centered on your competitive niche.
4. Improve and leverage local amenities.
5. Invest in your people.
6. Enrich and capture the region’s equity capital.
7. Tap technologies suited to your region’s unique capabilities, opportunities and culture.
8. Invest in 21st century infrastructure — communications, quality of life, education and transportation.

The common thread of his eight points is the ability of local communities to build effective teams of talented people who can effectively communicate, facilitate and stay focused on attaining goals. Agricultural interests must be at the table, and, thus,

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those of us who care about the future of rural America have to invest time and energy into these teams.

Legacy for future generations

My family's ranch lies along Hwy. 50 in western Colorado. Our neighbors are mostly ranchers with a few small acreage developments interspersed. Because of the scenic beauty of our region and the pressure brought on by a vibrant recreation industry, our valley is in danger of being converted into 40-acre ranchettes and second-home sites.

Fortunately, a dedicated group of people forged a partnership called the Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy

(www.gunnisonlegacy.org) with the specific mission "to create a legacy for future generations by preserving ranching and conserving ranchlands in the Gunnison Country." Working together for the past decade, the community has protected almost 14,500 acres of ag lands with an additional 15,000 acres waiting for funding.

In 1997, we began family discussions about the legacy we wanted to create and the dreams we had of the future. Those difficult, complex and emotional conversations eventually led us to a decision to place a conservation easement on our land. While not a perfect solution for every agricultural family, the choice was right for us. We didn't save the world, but we did the right thing in our little corner of the planet in partnership with our neighbors, in honor of our culture, and to assure that future generations would

have the opportunity to experience the landscape of "The Lost Sea of Grass."



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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. 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.