



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska

The ridge

From atop the ridgeline near the middle of our ranch, the panoramic view of the Gunnison Valley and its unique landscape is indeed spectacular. Even more amazing than the proverbial 10,000-foot view is the intricacy of the systems at play on our ranch and on those of our neighbors — family, plant and animal communities, soil, geography and culture. It is on that ridge where I find solace and from where the hard questions of life can be pondered. It is a good place to think about the future, to make peace with the past, and to consider alternatives for the present.

Words matter

These days as I gaze on the landscape that has sustained my family for nearly 80 years, I wonder what the future holds. Will we be able to remain viable as a profitable enterprise? How will future generations judge the legacy of intended stewardship we leave behind? What will become of our community and our culture?

Viability, stewardship, continuity and sustainability have been concepts that mattered to each generation of our family on the land in the high country of Colorado — certainly each time period with its own context, tools, knowledge and pressures, but nonetheless these ideas, these words, tie us to the past and to the future. Yet, words can be used as battering rams, and failure to reach consensus as to the meaning and context of a word or idea can generate friction between parties engaged in commerce, government and even personal relationships.

Mrs. Wallace, the senior English teacher at our local high school was the final hurdle between the young people of my community and graduation. She believed in the power of language, the value of thoughtful dialogue and spent countless hours driving her students to understand the meaning of words and concepts.

“Find a better word or make sure you understand the meaning of the one you are using” was her constant admonishment.

Viability — whether something is capable of growing, or something practical and able to be done.

Stewardship — the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care.

Continuity — an uninterrupted succession or flow; a coherent whole.

Sustainability — a method of harvesting



or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged.

Of the four, it seems that sustainability has become the catch phrase in many conversations about the future. Sustainability is one of those words that generate simultaneous frustration and fascination.

Frustration because the concept is often hijacked by those seeking simple solutions to complex questions, spin doctors who build talking points to capture political capital, or opportunists seeking to drive a wedge between producers and consumers and even between producers. Fascination because at the core of sustainability is the notion that continuous improvement is and has been a worthy goal; and that in the beef industry, the desire to generate stepwise, consistent improvement through the thoughtful allocation of resources has driven decisions ranging from genetics to beef quality assurance to grazing systems.

Pillars of management

However, I find it difficult to consider the future of our ranch and that of the beef industry without all four concepts — viability, stewardship, continuity and sustainability — as pillars of our vision and management. Taken in concert, these concepts allow us to remain focused on the creation of wealth. Real wealth is multi-dimensional and is measured in three realms:

1. Profit margins and economic opportunity

2. Healthy and productive landscapes
3. Strong communities, innovative cultures and creative people

Our legacy depends on our ability to blend the concepts of viability, stewardship, continuity and sustainability into the fabric of our decision-making. Perhaps Wyoming rancher Bob Budd said it best: “We have to learn to act in our own lifetimes while thinking at the pace of rocks and mountains.”

If we are truly committed to creation of sustained wealth, then we must embrace several key principles to live up to Bob Budd’s vision.

► We must recognize the uniqueness of landscapes, communities and enterprises. Thus, there is not a one-size-fits-all recipe.

► Solutions must be found by blending the deep knowledge of landowners, local communities and science. Much can be learned from studying and interacting within and external to our industry. For example, the lessons and guidance learned from the sustainability team at the chemical company BASF, coupled with the knowledge and experience of beef industry participants has moved the Beef Checkoff-funded Beef Lifecycle Assessment Project into a position as a leading and visionary effort.

► Multidimensional wealth creation is a journey, not a destination. There are no quick fixes nor simple answers. We must seek solutions and continuous improvement by increasing our knowledge, being deeply thoughtful in making trade-offs, and preventing the noise of politics and activism from weakening our resolve to leave a lasting legacy of value.

As I turn to ride down the ridge and into the meadow, I know that we have work to do, but that leaving a legacy of a healthy enterprise, landscape and community to my children will have made my life worth living.

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