

Speaking With People in Our Profession

An interview with Meg Smith

Meg Smith is a rancher in southwestern Montana and actively engaged in a host of relevant associations and programs related to rangelands and their management. A 1980 graduate of Montana State University with a dual BS degree in Agricultural Production and Range Science, Meg is also involved with state and local stockmen organizations, the local Conservation District Range Committee, and the East Pioneer Experimental Stewardship program, and she is on the Board of the Montana Department of Livestock. She, her brother, and her parents operate a cow/calf and yearling operation on private and public lands in the Big Hole area, as well as raise hay. They range calves in August and September. Meg and her family provide livestock grazing management on nearby public lands to enhance wildlife habitat in order to mitigate wildlife use of private lands. Needless to say, it took a number of weeks for her to find the time for this interview via email.

End the Charade and Make a Decision

Question: You're a member of a fifth generation ranching family, started in California in 1850, and that moved to Montana in 1964. What does the future hold for ranching in Montana and the western United States?

Answer: Extreme challenge.

Times are difficult for the livestock industry in the west—increased government regulations, wolves, water, wildlife, disease, wildfire, drought, whims of politics and markets, endangered species of any and every kind and what their management implies.

Here, wolves have taken over. I literally live with wolves. Yet, the trend in public opinion and actions is toward wildlife, second homes, large subdivisions, let us all live “in harmony” mentality, with no room for the realities of hunting, dead beasts, what food requirements animals have, planning/management to deter outcome of catastrophic events, and no acceptance of the reality that animals, whether it be pygmy rabbit, elk, cow, or sheep, excrete wastes like the rest of us.

We have been told by government to “suck it up.” There is little tolerance, presently, for ranchers and the domestic livestock they raise. With these things thrown our way, daily, prospects for ranching seem daunting if not doomed, don't they? I guess it all depends on the attitude.

And your attitude is?

People in this country need to decide. Where do humans fit in to the environment of the west, or anywhere for that matter? Do they want ranching in the west, or not? Is ranching in the west acceptable agriculture? Are domestic animals acceptable, necessary, and sustainable on western landscapes? If our society deems not, then don't nickel and dime us to death with regulations, thou shalt and thou shalt nots, squeezing us into an incomprehensible space where there is no room to function. Even nature doesn't do this, but government does!

The time and energy expended for us to “protect and defend” ourselves, currently, could be better spent in achieving positive outcomes. So, be honest, and make a decision to end the charade. Either do a mercy killing and euthanize us now, or release the stranglehold imposed by government and special interest groups.



Meg Smith chatting with a visiting friend and getting him to smile while they are headed out to work in her family's chosen environment.

How are you helping to move the public towards a decision?

One challenge is that ranchers must begin to represent themselves again, rather than rely on organizations. Organizations are powerful tools, when combating endless attacks on private property owners and livestock producers. However, no organization can take the place of the individual. We all need to show up and be counted. We each have our own experiences and wisdom. My experience with wolves killing my calves may be different than my neighbors; thus, my suggestions and recommendations to the Fish and Wildlife Service may be different as well. Sometimes we hunker in our bunkers, hoping things will go away and get better, or we think our livestock industry groups will handle it. Often our mentality can be "I am haying, calving, lambing, feeding, irrigating, spraying weeds, and I don't have time to address this stuff." If we continue with this attitude, we will have nothing but time on our hands. We have got to show up for ourselves.

You invest a lot of time showing up. When you show up, what are you trying to bring to the table?

I believe we in the ranching world of the west need to take a hard look at ourselves, take inventory of what we have been doing, where it has gotten us, and set a goal of where we want to be. Make the difficult choices. Take a reality check on ourselves—what has been our impact on our land, because of our management techniques. What can we do better, what do we want to repeat, and what do we want to never do again!

Bone up on what is happening, become agents of change, if change is necessary. I would say one needs to be filled with optimism, enthusiasm, a healthy dose of reality, and a sense of personal accountability. I made the choice to ranch, so, this is part and parcel of the job, going to meetings, testifying and informing the legislature, reaching out to diverse groups, and coming home late at night to patrol for wolves.

How can the federal government really help the proper management of our western rangelands, or even those lands immediately adjacent to your ranch?

By taking a serious reality check.

The Feds must actively manage their lands, and not by absenteeism or default. Taxpaying citizens need to have their voices heard to their government that the land has got to have top priority, not to be preserved, but to be wisely utilized for the future of this country. Show the American public that soils, plants, and animals—the ecosystem—is a dynamic, changing entity, and that removing humans from the landscape is not healthy for land or for people. And they need to quit hiding behind "science-based management" when that science may either not apply, be completely lacking, misinterpreted, or be of poor quality, any or all of which can often be the case.

Don't lock it up and throw away the key. Recognize value of private property to the big picture of land, and its health. And, for Pete's sake, stop offering to buy us out and shoving conservation easements at every turn. We want to raise grass and livestock, not be a nature preserve. We raise thousands of head of wildlife as it is, quite nicely on our place, and they are not in danger of losing habitat. The hue and cry over habitat rings hollow for me.

You've held numerous leadership positions in the Society for Range Management over the years. What is the attraction of spending your time and energy supporting the activities of a nonprofit organization such as the SRM?

The learning, sharing of experiences, the fellowship with people that have that "fire in the belly" for plants and animals, soil and water, and how it all works together. Learning more about betterment and health of the land. The opportunity to sit down and "break bread" with people that have a common care of the land, but have different areas of expertise and knowledge; people that are willing to share their resource with anyone who cares to ask for it. It's all about people, really.

In your business you spend a lot of time staring at the back end of a cow. Why do you think a large segment of the American public continues to look on ranching as such a romantic lifestyle?

I have written my best poetry after looking at the south end of a north-bound cow for long periods of time. And had many stellar debates, all of which I won.

We all tend to want what is different. People want what they don't have; when sitting in an office cubicle we yearn for something more. It is easy to idealize things that other humans have, and do. In some ways it is pleasant to think that the American public "likes" us ranchers, because the reality we are dealing with in the West is quite opposite.

It is puzzling. The paradox is that the public apparently loves us, our ranching way of life; yet ranching is some sort of pariah. What is the real truth?

Do you have any advice for the next generation of people hoping to get into ranching?

Do you love livestock and land?

If so, then, go for it. If you have the desire, you will find a way. Do it without expectations of making a million dollar paycheck, but have an expectation to succeed. Seek advice from others, but still do your own research, glean your information from a wide array of disciplines, and from diverse groups of people.

Never stop learning and observing.

Expect a beautiful way of life, not a high income. Set goals, make a budget, and be of the entrepreneurial mindset. Take care of the land, and it will take care of you.

No need to have anything fancy in ways of buildings and improvements, as long as you have good grass, good cows, and good attitudes, you can succeed.

Ranching has allowed me to live the way I live, a life that I love with freedom to enjoy the outdoors and critters. I love cows!

It has given all of our family on this ranch a good living, emotionally, spiritually, and otherwise. Is there anything more satisfying than this?

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