



Photo by Ray Prange, Carr, Colo.

Total Quality Management The Key to Ranching's Next Century

by Ken Spann

As we begin the second century of ranching in the Gunnison Valley, stop and take a moment to reflect on the tools and strategies needed to insure that ranching will be around well into the next century. Obviously, to achieve continued success, producers need to focus on those elements that assure profitability of their ranches. No doubt luck, hard work, perseverance, and dedication are components in any successful ranch. So are integrity and quality. For years, the cattle raised "in the Gunnison Country" have been some of the highest quality livestock found anywhere in the West. That consistent focus on quality in the cattle has now found its way into every facet of our ranches and is a key to future stability. Total Quality Management, a watchword in modern American industry, has come to the cattle business.

Total Quality Management, or TQM, is a production or manufacturing philosophy that impacts every area of man-

agement in a production system. It requires a commitment of management and considerable effort on the part of ranch operators on a daily basis. The rewards, however, are such as to insure the rancher a place in the future.

It begins with the basics—the production of the calves during their stay on the ranch must be managed with the final consumer in mind. The calves themselves must be uniform and predictable in their performance when they leave the ranch, no matter who owns them in the next phase of the production chain. Unless they are predictable in their performance and composition, they will not be a high quality product on grass or in the feedyard, the packing house, or restaurant.

Consistent, uniform calves don't just happen. It takes a year-around commitment to Total Quality Management. Producers who survived the difficult economic times of the early-mid 1980s learned to focus on breeding through detailed study followed by careful selection of quality genetics.

They have reached the point where 600+ pound fall weaning weights are possible and even the norm. Ranchers have learned to manage for performance in each individual cow and to demand nothing less, culling severely the bovine that lags behind.

Most successful ranchers also recognize that, first and foremost, they are grass reproducers, and that ultimately the cows only harvest the forage that the rancher produces or buys. In the concept of TQM, that places a tremendous premium on the rancher who is an exceptional steward of the land he manages. The rancher who always has a little extra feed will ultimately be the one whose cows can really perform, producing those uniform and consistently big calves. Ranchers have applied principles of TQM in the management of their pastures and hay meadows, learning that time spent in careful planning of irrigation facilities yielded great savings in the time actually spent spreading water on the fields. The arrival of the 4 X 4 ATV has greatly increased the amount of land that can be looked at in a single day and, thereby, the efficiency of irrigation.

In the high country where winter feeding is a must, Gunnison ranchers have endeavored to find new ways of putting up hay with less labor. The recent development of the large round and square balers with much of the labor done with hydraulics has greatly improved total efficiency and allowed ranchers to put financial resources to work in other areas. Ranchers have learned how to feed the hay back in the winter with less labor. Some of the same types of computer chips used to calculate the rations fed in the wintertime even run control sensors on the hay balers in the summers!

Even with the modern labor-saving equipment, ranching is still very much a hands-on occupation. To meet that reality, today's ranchers have developed ways to improve the quality of their workforce, both with more detailed hiring practices and by providing greater opportunities for education of employees. TQM on today's ranches means that the day of the itinerant cowboy are gone forever, replaced by specialized employees with exacting job assignments and responsibilities. Yes, the rope and saddle are still summertime standard equipment, but today's cow boss also must know the difference between ionophores and ceftiofur sodium, and which one has the greater effect on a feed steer reaching slight 90 in a plant in Western Kansas. Cattle prices are fed down into DTN, which a cowboy reads with MS-DOS, and compares with Windows, and then sells on the video. Just like 100 years before, it's not a business for the faint of heart.

TQM today means that all the focus of the ranch is on producing a quality product in a productive environment. It means gaining a competitive advantage, yet protecting against problems that can devalue the product. Successfully implementing TQM means evaluating and objectively measuring ranch practices that collectively create a quality workplace and quality products. That doesn't necessarily mean fancy equipment or pipe corrals all painted white up every little creek in the valley. Rather, in the final

analysis, it means a well-defined and well-executed approach to continuous improvement. That, ultimately, will add value to the calves produced, not cost to the manner in which they were proceeded.

TQM also requires that we act responsibly toward the communities that we live in and environmental resources for which we are responsible. There are shining examples in the Gunnison ranching industry of efforts above and beyond the norm at caring for the land, private or public, and the wildlife, water, and plants that abound here. Most of our members have served and will continue to serve on the myriad of community boards and organizations that make the Gunnison Valley one of the truly special places in the West today. By being responsible citizens, ranchers are working to provide a safe and healthy environment for their families and for their businesses. By working together to create a quality product, we will insure ranching's second century in the Gunnison Valley.

Editor's Note: This article is related to the upcoming Summer Meeting to be held in Crested Butte, Colorado, July 23-26, 1998.

The author is a local rancher from long-time pioneering ranching families in the Gunnison Basin. He is very active in local and statewide livestock industry affairs, including participation in the GOVERNOR'S Rangeland Reform Group, High Country Citizens Alliance, USFS and BLM Advisory Groups, and as an invited presenter at SRM functions. This article is reprinted with permission from the Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association (GSCA) publication.