



The *New* American Farmer

Dan Hanson

Lusk, Wyoming

Summary of Operation

■ *About 950 cow/calf pairs and 250 replacements, mostly Hereford and Angus on 30,000 acres*

Problem Addressed

Revitalizing profits. Ranching used to be so profitable for the Hanson family that their cattle enterprise supported multiple families. But by the 1980s, beef prices had dipped so low that Dan Hanson reached an economic turning point.

While others hung up their saddles and cashed in their cattle, Hanson was determined to keep the third-generation family ranch viable. He had heard about Holistic Management® and its techniques to set — and achieve — goals to boost profits, protect natural resources and build time for family and community. In 1992, Hanson attended Holistic Management® workshops in Lusk, Wyo., and his interest was piqued.

Background

The ranch was established in 1905 by Hanson's grandparents. When Hanson was growing up, the ranch supported his large family and the families of their five ranch hands. "The wives would raise gardens and the kids while the husbands worked," he recalled. But when profits began to slide, all of the wives took off-farm jobs. Soon after, the ranch hands were laid off.

"The price of the product didn't keep pace with everything else," Hanson says. "The industry has changed so much. In 1980, it wasn't very profitable at all."

The trend continued after he took over the ranch in 1980. Taking a holistic view allowed Hanson to visualize the changes that would revitalize the ranch, from his pocketbook to the rangeland. The changes he implemented also have helped Hanson achieve his goal to teach kids about ranching and nature.

Focal Point of Operation – Holistic ranching

Habitually, Hanson talks about his respect for nature and its cycles. For example, his cows calve each spring when the grass is at its most lush. "The closer to when Mother Nature wants them to calve, the better," he says.

Every fall, Hanson sells his yearlings, maintaining a winter herd of cows and replacement heifers. (In 2004, a drought forced him to sell the yearlings in May.) Before the sale, cattle herds move throughout the range on an intentional schedule. In fact, the ranch now supports a higher density of animals – 950 cow-calf pairs instead of 750.

Hanson rotates the herd through a series of small pastures ranging from 90 acres to 2,000. He moves the animals in large groups – separating cow/heifer pairs, stockers and replacement heifers – that graze a pasture for up to 15 days. Hanson monitors the pasture growth carefully and moves the herd before the forage is depleted.

The rotational grazing provides the pasture with much-needed rejuvenation time. By moving fewer groups of cattle through many small paddocks, Hanson ensures that his pastures have that time.

“When a grass plant grows to a certain height and the roots are healthy, that’s the time to bite it off,” he says, referencing what he called the simplest yet most important lesson he learned. “Then you leave it alone until the plant has recovered. Most people turn out their herd and leave the cattle in the pasture all summer.”

Hanson already had the fencing, but needed to improve his watering system to convert to rotational range management. Since 1980, Hanson has added 40 miles of underground pipeline that runs from a creek bottom well to 17 trough tanks 50- to 160-feet long. The tanks, which the Hansons had built from old 16-inch pipe split down the middle, enable the herds to go into formerly arid pastures. They also provide enough water for him to bunch his cattle in larger groups, a key to Hanson’s time management.

Economics and Profitability

Where Hanson Ranch was previously unprofitable, Hanson now earns enough that he plans to buy some of his siblings’ shares in the ranch. He points out with pride that all of his family’s income comes from the ranch, as neither he nor his wife or sons have jobs off the ranch.

Rotational range management has been good for business. Before his change in rangeland management, Hanson stocked about one animal per 50 acres. By 2004, he had increased the stocking rate by one-fourth.

Hanson points out that he improved profits



Ron Daines

At least once a year, Dan Hanson opens the ranch to third and fourth graders.

by lowering costs. After improving his pasture system, Hanson divested himself of unneeded machinery, retaining just one tractor for fencing and the very occasional need to feed hay. “One of my neighbors raises hay and his tractors never cool off,” he says. “I’m on the other end of the scale. We both make money; it’s the people in between who have a hard time.”

He also reduced supplemental feed and minerals for the herd, which primarily grazes grass. Only when it snows heavily does he feed the cows hay, as he did twice in 2003. Calves receive a daily supplement

that costs just 9 cents per head per day.

Environmental Benefits

Hanson prefaces a list of his conservation measures with a caution that he is not a more environmentally sound rancher than his neighbors. “In Wyoming, ranchers have done an awfully good job of taking care of the land,” he says.

Controlling the movement of his cattle, however, has had some extra benefits, including a rebirth of native cottonwood trees. Welcome on any Wyoming ranch, where trees are scarce, the cottonwoods provide important shelter from winter storms. “By timing the grazing right, we can make trees grow better and can improve any species of grass, warm- and cool-season,” Hanson says.

He has gained a new appreciation of forages he once regarded as pests, including cat-tails. The cattle graze it and receive extra phosphorus. The cows will even graze spotted knapweed at the right time, if they’re hungry for minerals. “When you’re watching what’s happening around you, you learn something,” Hanson says.

Rather than fencing his herd away from riparian areas, Hanson allows them limited access. The hoof action from large ruminants is part of the natural cycle on the range, he says, as is their grazing of “decadent” grasses and other vegetation. “Beautiful riparian areas would have never happened and will not continue to be so without animals of all sizes and their impact,” he says.

Similarly, Hanson believes that cattle help the water cycle by breaking the “cap” that forms on the ground. As they move across the pasture, they help loosen the hard pan and encourage water to percolate.



Ron Daines

Wildlife habitat has improved. Hanson sees more grouse, partridge and elk on the ranch. Moving the herd has helped manage flies, so Hanson no longer sprays to control them.

Riding through the property can reveal a visible contrast in soil quality. Once, when Hanson was moving the herd on horseback with his kids, they rode on such slick ground that he feared one of his sons would fall. Across the property line, the ground was a fine dust. “The water cycle was better on the first side,” he says, “and that’s because of our timing with cattle. I’ve seen a big difference.”

In 1999, the family received Wyoming’s Environment Stewardship Award. In 2000, they received a regional environmental stewardship award from the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association.

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

When Hanson went through the goal-setting process, in HM, he looked beyond the ranch gates. Not only did he want the ranch to be profitable, but he also wanted to be a

contributing member to his community.

To that end, he has committed to teaching kids about ranching and nature throughout Lusk and Niobrara counties and beyond. At least once a year, Hanson hosts a class of third and fourth graders on the ranch and visits them in the classroom, part of his agreement with the state’s Ag in the Classroom program.

The on-ranch curriculum he helped develop includes the lifecycle of a log, the lifecycle of a stream, insects, stream salinity and the web of life. He has helped train teachers across Wyoming about ranching — and ranching within nature.

“It’s good to get them in the country and on their hands and knees in the grass,” he says. Above all, he wants kids from the city to see that ranchers are not bad for the land and are, in fact, active agents for environmental improvement. “People understood ag pretty well in the ’50s’ and ’60s but now a lot of young people don’t have a clue where their food comes from,” he says.

Running cattle in just two groups provides Hanson with much more time to spend with his family, including his sons. Dan Henry, who was featured in a Microsoft TV commercial when the computer giant was seeking a rural user who surfed intelligently online, “can identify grass better than I can,” Hanson says.

Hanson seems content where he is and where he has taken the ranch over the last 24 years. “I love to see anybody live his passion,” he says. “I’m fortunate because I love ranching and I’m able to live my passion.”

Transition Advice

“My advice would be to get rid of anything that rusts, rots or depreciates and go back to grass ranching,” Hanson says.

The Future

Hanson doesn’t have to look too far to see cattle producers pushing the envelope. His nephews direct-market grass-fed beef, which Hanson finds intriguing. With a processor nearby, he hopes to shift some of his sales from wholesale to direct.

Other relatives raise and label their meat as “natural” beef, meaning that during production it was not treated with antibiotics or hormones. That is quite within his reach, as long as the herd doesn’t experience a swift-moving virus, as it did in 2004. “It’s not that big a trick when you’re in sync with Mother Nature,” he says.

■ Valerie Berton

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Editor’s note: New in 2005