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Increasing Income for Rangeland Cattle Ranchers: The San Juan Ranch Horse Series

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Abstract: The San Juan Ranch Horse Series (SJRHS) is a program that was implemented in rural Utah to help ranchers with a downward spiraling horse market, provide education about equine management, and economically benefit local communities. The SJRHS has been successful in all three components of its mission.

Introduction

Beef cattle production is the main agricultural commodity of southeastern Utah (Snyder, Fawson, & Keyes, 1995). Most of the cow/calf operations in the area use rangeland-type management systems. The cattle circulate from desert sagebrush steppe in the winter to higher altitude forest country in the summer. Supplemental feeding is almost non-existent, with cattle foraging year-round to meet their nutritional needs. As in any agricultural operations, profit margins are extremely tight for rangeland cattle outfits. In order to survive, ranchers need to add and diversify income (Schroeder, 2004).

One way to increase income is to increase efficiency of existing enterprises without increasing inputs (Brazil & Brazil, 1996). Horses are a necessary tool for managing these cattle outfits because of the ruggedness of the terrain. Local ranches, depending on the size of the business, maintain horse herds of 15-60 animals. Ranch horses are often retired and put up for sale at an age when they can no longer endure the rigors of constant ranch work. In the past, most of these horses have been sold at the local livestock auction for \$50 to \$250, depending on their value to the slaughter market. Despite their age, many of these horses still hold value for people interested in recreational riding. No venue existed for bringing ranchers and prospective recreational horse buyers together.

Program Development

Identifying the need for a market that would enable ranchers to obtain a greater income for their retired ranch horses, the Extension Educator in San Juan County, Utah developed the San Juan Ranch Horse Series (SJRHS). The series was designed to not only create a marketing venue for ranch horses, but also provide educational opportunities for ranchers who had horse breeding programs and to ranch employees who were using horses in the discharge of their duties. An advisory board, made up of local ranchers, was organized to give direction to the program. This group not only identified important educational issues, but also set parameters for the actual horse sale. To not overload the potential market, the number of consignments was limited to between 60 and 70 horses. To give the auction some diversity, other classes of horses such as weanlings, yearlings, green broke animals, and brood mares were allowed consignment spots with preference being given to ranch broke geldings.

Education

Successful Extension programs should always possess an educational component (Seevers, Graham, Gammon, & Conklin, 1997). To enhance the SJRHS, an educational activity has been included each year with the horse sale. Workshops on different subjects have been held on the evening before the horse sale. The educational programs have included trainers, farriers, and drug companies.

Community Benefits

Another activity in conjunction with the sale is a ranch rodeo that has been held every year since the beginning. It has become a very important component of the entire program. Included with this is a dutch oven cookout for horse sale consignors, ranch rodeo contestants, local ranchers, and potential customers. The horse sale and its accompanying activities bring a festive mood to the rural community of Monticello, Utah. It also brings patrons for the local motels, convenience stores, and restaurants. At the 5th annual sale there were people from six western states. At this point there is no official data as to what effect the sale has on the local economy, but it can be assumed that it is considerable for the weekend in question.

Summary

At almost the same time the SJRHS was beginning, most all of the horse slaughter facilities in the United States were closed down. This sent the horse market into a downward tailspin. Horses in the U.S. suddenly declined in value approximately \$304 per head (North, Bailey, & Ward, 2005). Suddenly the SJRHS had much more potential to provide economic help to local agricultural operators. Horses that were selling at the local sale barn for \$25 - \$60 were bringing \$1,200 - \$1,900 at the SJRHS. Extension workers, so inclined, can use this opportunity to provide not only educational programming, but also a much-needed service for their agricultural clientele as well as rural communities.

Table 1.
San Juan Ranch Horse Sale—Sale Results

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
High selling horse	\$5,000	\$3,000	\$4,000	\$3,200	\$1,900
Top 25 % Average	\$2,672	\$2,061	\$2,150	\$2,175	\$1,620
Top 50% Average	\$1,917	\$1,598	\$1,617	\$1,742	\$1,282
# of Horses in Sale	56	62	65	48	55
Pass outs	18	14	14	9	13
% Horses Sold	68	78	79	81	76
Sale Revenue	\$49,100	\$40,750	\$46,550	\$46,025	\$37,475

Conclusion

The San Juan Ranch Horse Series has proven itself to be an effective program in helping ranchers find a market for their horses, providing education to the local ranching population, and bringing an economic gain to a rural community. It would be valuable, in the future, to find a way to collect data on the effect that the SJRHS has on community businesses.

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