

Possible Impacts of Industrialization and Globalization of Animal Agriculture on Cattle Ranching in the American West (Can Environmentalists Save the Ranch?)

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Western cattle ranchers are involved in many controversies, including public lands grazing, cattle impacts on fish and water quality, and many other environmentally-oriented issues. However, we suggest that one of the most serious threats to traditional cattle ranching is that posed by the industrialization and globalization of animal agriculture. In light of this threat, it is not beyond reason to ask "can environmentalists save the ranch?" The following explains our point of view.

Poultry production in the US is industrialized, controlled by a few vertically-integrated corporations. The result is that broiler meat, compared to beef, is very inexpensive. The dramatically increased market share for poultry has come almost entirely at the expense of beef. Similarly, the swine industry is rapidly industrializing. There are now in the US numerous swine mega-farms, with over 100 thousand sows each, producing over 2 million pigs per farm per year. Industrial production of swine and poultry allows for use of technologies that make these meats increasingly less expensive in the supermarket than beef. Both the poultry and swine industries have identified their goals of taking further market share from beef and dominating the global meat industry.

For beef to be more competitive with poultry and pork, beef production must industrialize. This will likely occur in parts of the US where feed resources are greater and environmental disputes less than on western rangelands. Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas are examples of areas with greater proximity to productive privately-owned grasslands for cow-calf operations, lower winter feeding costs, and abundant supplies of grain for feedlot finishing. With a declining market share for beef, and an intensification of beef production in other parts of the country, economic pressures on cattle ranching seem likely to increase. Current low prices could become permanent.

Moderate environmentalists could be important allies for cattle ranchers in responding to the increasing intensification, economic efficiency and corporate control of other types of animal production. Environmentalists are leading the opposition to industrial production (factory farming) of poultry and pigs. There are legitimate ethical questions and negative public perceptions regarding the welfare of animals raised in total confinement on factory farms, in contrast to the conditions under which beef cattle are produced on western rangelands. Public pressure against intensive





confinement of animals could reduce some of the competitive advantage of poultry and swine over beef production, by requiring modifications to intensive systems to improve animal welfare. In some European countries industrial production of livestock has been banned due to public pressure against confinement systems. In his recent book "Farm Animal Welfare," Bernard Rollin of Colorado State University claims "of all production systems, beef production most closely approximates the social ethic of husbandry." He suggests that the beef industry could capitalize on that image. Perhaps a good niche market for many ranchers could be the production of "environmentally-friendly" beef (or, in current terminology, "free range beef"!).

Environmentalists are also opposed to industrial animal production because of concerns regarding air and water pollution, soil erosion associated with intensive production of corn and soybeans for use as chicken and pig feed, the high fossil fuel requirements for industrial production, and the social costs associated with the change in rural structure that occurs when family farms are replaced with factory farms. Environmentalists advocate that industrial agriculture should pay these hidden costs that are assessed to society at large and are essentially a subsidy to industrial animal agriculture.

Environmentalists and ranchers share other common interests. Western rangelands are rapidly being "developed," with cattle ranches and wildlife habitat being converted to condominium sites, summer homes, ski lodges, and suburbs. Urbanization of the west will have far greater negative environmental consequences than cattle ranching ever has

or will have. With appropriate range management techniques, cattle ranching can play a positive role in ecosystem restoration and preservation of endangered species. Which is better wildlife habitat: a cattle ranch, a wheat field or sprawling suburbs? In many European countries, farmers are considered "guardians of the countryside." English farmers are paid subsidies if they maintain hedges and rock walls. Swiss dairy farmers are subsidized so that tourists can see Brown Swiss cows on mountain meadows. Ranchers can help preserve the western cultural heritage. Subsidized grazing fees, though often criticized, may be a small price to pay for the preservation of rangelands and wildlife habitat.

Do we want to have our meat provided by swine mega-farms, chicken factories, and beef factories, located (perhaps overseas) where feed, water, labor and waste disposal costs are lowest for the shareholders of multinational food companies? Is western cattle ranching destined to the same fate as sheep ranching? One of the most positive things that cattle ranchers could do to ensure their survival in the face of competition from industrial production of animal protein is to make peace with environmentalists. As the most vocal and committed opponents of industrialized animal agriculture and "development" of rural land, they may indeed be among the ranchers' best friends.

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