

Range Beef Cow Symposium XX

Dec. 11-13, 2007 • Larimer County Fairgrounds and Events Complex, Fort Collins, Colo.

Country Natural Beef Finds Success as Ranch-To-Retail Alliance

by Troy Smith

FORT COLLINS, Colo. (Dec. 12, 2007) — “We weren’t going broke in ranching yet, but we could kind of see it coming,” said Doc Hatfield, during the Range Beef Cow Symposium’s Tuesday afternoon session. Hatfield said that’s why he and his wife, Connie, took a hard look at their Brothers, Ore., cattle operation and decided to break out of the commodity beef business.

In 1986, the Hatfields spurred the formation of an alliance with 14 other ranch families who also embraced the concept of producing beef to meet specific consumer needs and wants. They formed Country Natural Beef, a cooperative that would merchandise beef to consumers seeking beef grown without added hormones and antibiotics. They also capitalized on their target clientele’s interest in the families that produced that beef.

The cooperative now includes more than 100 ranches owning more than 100,000 mother cows. From the marketing of three to five animals per week in 1986, Country Natural Beef has grown to where 2007 sales will include more than 50,000 head. Through the cooperative’s partnership with an Oregon feedlot and a Washington beef processor, member-ranchers retain ownership and control of the cattle until the beef reaches a retail partner’s coolers. Retail outlets include natural food retailers in several states.

According to Connie Hatfield, all retailers are promoting Country Natural Beef



► Doc Hatfield

beyond the brand name by emphasizing the connection between products and the cooperative’s producer families. Consumers also find appeal in learning that the beef they buy was raised in environmentally friendly production systems and under low-stress conditions. It’s a merchandising step that adds an emotional connection and further differentiates Country Natural Beef in the marketplace.

Accordingly, rancher members must agree to deliver cattle that are committed to the program 12-18 months in advance. They

attend two three-day membership meetings per year. They agree to spend one weekend in the city promoting Country Natural Beef, and devote at least one day to hosting customers attending an “appreciation day” on the ranch, or a rancher-sponsored tour. Requirements also include Food Alliance certification for humane animal handling and management principles.

“That’s what we’ve done — formed a ranch-to-retail alliance. It provides more value to the customer and more pride and meaning to our ranchers’ work,” Doc Hatfield says. “It’s simple, but it isn’t always easy.”

Range Beef Cow Symposium XX is hosted by the cooperative extension services and animal science departments of Colorado State University, South Dakota State University, the University of Wyoming and the University of Nebraska. The symposium is at the Larimer County Fairgrounds and Events Complex, Fort Collins, Colo., Dec. 11-13. Additional coverage of the conference is available at www.rangebeefcow.com.

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