

Summer 1999

& Programs People

Idaho's WIRE Story
A Bug's Place
Goodbye to Debt

 University of Idaho
College of Agriculture

Taking Everything into Account

by Marlene Fritz



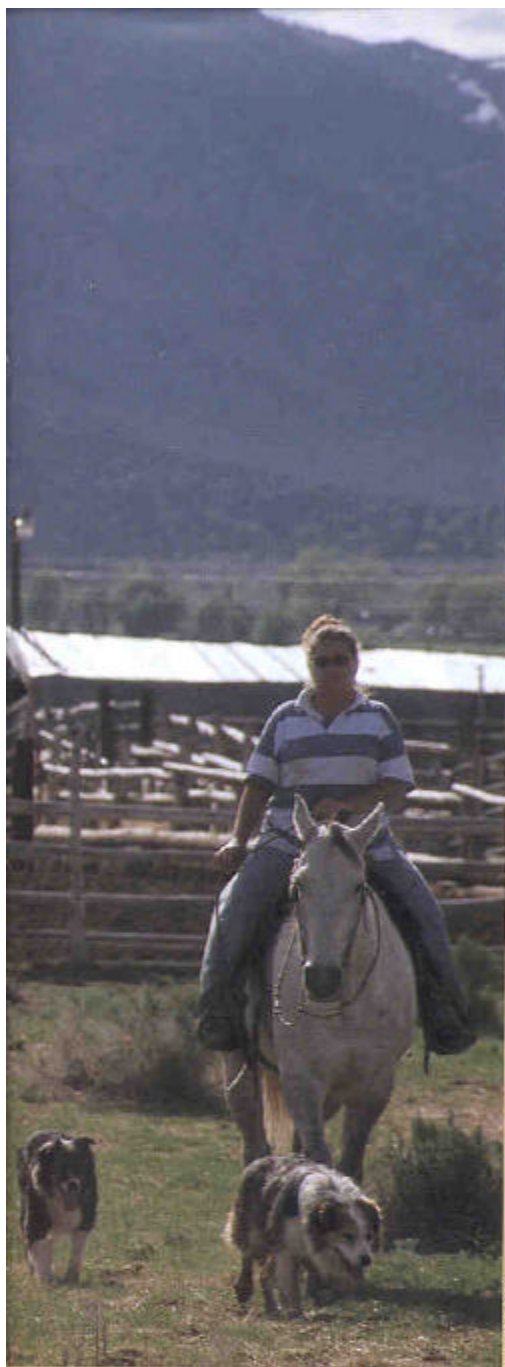
Determined to ride out the rough farm economy and emerge even tougher, Idaho producers enrolled in the intensive WIRE program scrutinize every aspect of their operations.

They're short on time, short on money, and just plain "scattered too thin to take care of everything the way it ought to be taken care of." For Doug and Jayne Ward, the sun rises and sets on their Almo ranch, but it's "hard country to do anything but run cattle or sheep on" and it's got no tucked-away gold mines to help the Wards dig out of sinkholes in the cattle cycle.

Still, Doug Ward loves the challenge of being an Idaho rancher. "Some would call it the challenge of poverty, but to me it's the challenge of going out every day and facing what comes and making it work."

"They're just tough," says Wilson Gray, University of Idaho extension agricultural economist, of Idaho's surviving ranchers. "We've had four years of lower prices and they're still here. They're willing to stay with it through a lot of adversity and they're planning on next year being better. And it IS going to turn around—the big question is when."

Tough or not, most Idaho ranchers—and farmers—are reeling in their saddles. "We're in a horrendous farm crisis in Idaho right now," says Joel Packham, UI extension educator in Bear Lake County. "Producers are going to



Pam Bertram

have to be the best possible managers to make it."

Between 1987 and 1997, the Idaho Census of Agriculture shows a 22.4 percent decline—to 7,148—in the total number of Idaho farms with \$10,000 to \$100,000 in annual sales. According to Gray, nearly a quarter of Idaho beef operations with fewer than 100 head of cattle folded between 1988 and 1998; during that same decade, the number of ranches with 100 or more cows slipped 6.25 percent, to 1,500. Returns over total costs averaged -\$145 per cow in 1998, -\$86 in 1996, and -\$163 in 1994.

Gray and Packham agree: The pass-

word into the 21st century will be sustainability. When better prices come, will producers have made the crucial changes that will sustain their operations through the next downturn?

To help both Idaho ranchers and farmers realign their limited financial, natural, and human resources, Packham, Gray, and nearly a dozen other Cooperative Extension System faculty first brought the Western Integrated Resource Education (WIRE) program to Idaho in 1997. Developed in Wyoming in 1992 and partially supported by a grant from USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, WIRE is bent on helping agricultural producers hang onto their operations and to helping rural communities hang onto their producers.

"Every time someone consolidates and a farm family leaves the community, that's a loss that's far greater than if someone moves out of Boise," says UI extension rural sociologist Aaron Harp.

Ironically, while many producers claim they're not people-oriented, Harp

says they're holding their rural communities together. "They're bound to the land. When no one else is around, they're going to be the folks on the road-and-bridge board, the school board, the county commission."

Altogether 45 families have completed the WIRE training in five southern Idaho locations during the past two winters. So far, most have been livestock producers, but interest among farmers is building. "The management principles they learn are universal for agricultural businesses—and really any businesses," Packham says.

Participants systematically explore their operation's physical, biological, financial, and human components. They examine not only the who's, what's, where's, when's, and how's but also the why's of their family's agricultural business. No questions are off-limits.

The intense, six-day WIRE course is almost overwhelming in its comprehensiveness. WIRE trainees build intra-family communications skills, prioritize

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left: WIRE participants Doug and Jayne Ward with their daughters Rebecca, 19, and Nicole, 15, contemplate starting a dude ranch where they summer their cattle near the Sawtooth National Forest.

above: The Wards discuss the day's branding and other activities.

their strategic goals, outline tactical plans, inventory their resources, identify potential weak links, and practice analyzing individual enterprises as stand-alone units and as parts of the whole. They also learn how to identify and evaluate ideas for alternative enterprises that could rope in additional income.

David Ellis of Hollister attended WIRE training with his mother, Diane, of Salmon. "It's really difficult for just one person to go," he says. "You get all excited, all jazzed up, and then you go back home and you have a hard time getting other people to understand these things that are still so absolutely new to yourself."

Jayne Ward took off work from the Post Office so that she and Doug could go as a team. Jayne thinks she and the couple's two daughters might just be able to develop a dude ranch on the family's summer pasture bordering the Sawtooth National Forest. The Wards are using the human-resource management

"Unless you research it very well, making a radical change could be your death warrant."

skills they learned at WIRE to determine whether they can budget enough time to pull it off.

If running a dude ranch means she can keep on living in the country, that's reason enough for Jayne to do it. Born in Las Vegas, Jayne met Doug in high school while her dad was building the freeway past Malta. Enthralled by the Intermountain setting, Jayne put her roots down fast and deep. "I like watching animals grow and improving them genetically," she says. "It's something I've always wanted to do."

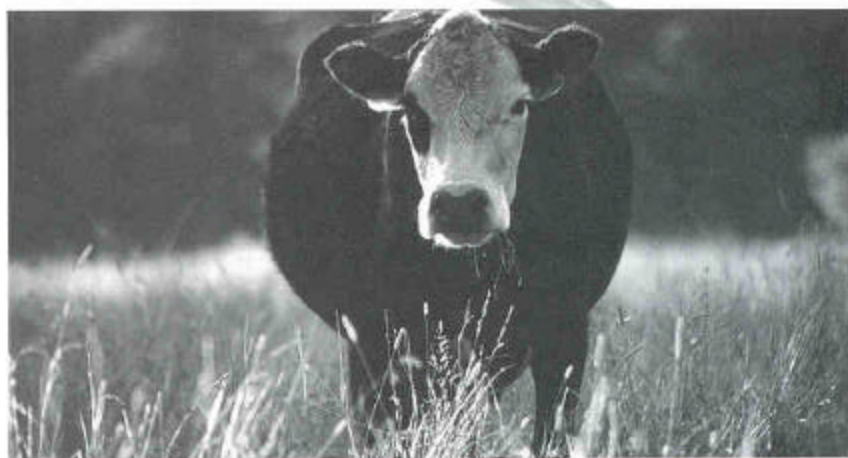
Challis ranchers Gary and Carol Chamberlain participated in January 1999 WIRE training with their son, Jim. They had considered a ranch-recreation enterprise but concluded they're "already busy enough." Besides, Gary says candidly, "Is it really worth it to us? Do

we want to put up with the idiosyncrasies of city people who don't know what they're doing?"

Among the Chamberlain's six current enterprises—cow-calf, sheep, horses, grain, alfalfa hay, and hay cubes—not one stands out as a money maker right now, says Jim. Their hay cubing operation—launched in 1991 to supply weed-free hay to outfitters in the River of No Return Wilderness—surged from 200 to 500 tons before plateauing. "As the cattle market improves, we're planning to enlarge it," says Gary, "but with the cattle market as depressed as

it's been for the past few years, finances right now won't allow it." Nor will their high-mountain climate allow the Chamberlains to grow much besides hay, grain, and livestock.

Even when climate allows, Gray says departing radically from the business they know is inadvisable for most producers. While farmers and ranchers should be open to the potential of unfamiliar products and services, they should also be cautious of the risks. "Unless you research it very well, making a radical change could be your death warrant," Gray says. "Small changes in a lot of



Elton Bishop

Fresher pastures green up the bottom line

Chad Cheyney, UI extension educator in Butte County, calls it "survival."

Management-intensive grazing—or converting sunlight first to grass, then to beef-on-the-hoof as efficiently as possible—can keep livestock producers in business and rural communities on the map. "Capturing and converting energy to a saleable product at the lowest possible price has got to mean more profit," he says.

In 1994 and again in 1998, Cheyney taught the grazing system at the Lost River Grazing Academy near Arco.

Under intensive management, densely grouped cattle are moved swiftly from paddock to paddock, briskly munching forage down to a target level. The grass rapidly regrows during the rest period that follows. The feeding window can be as short as 12 hours and the rest window as long as 180 days. This time-controlled grazing is good for the cattle, good for the grass, and good for the soil and water, but it demands precision management. Cheyney encourages producers to take the time to learn it because "what they're doing now isn't working."

Moving cattle more frequently also calls for handlers with a less-aggressive touch. Steve Cote, district conservationist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service at Arco, teaches academy participants that if they don't act like predators, their cattle won't act like prey. Cows stressed by human aggression tend to stray and to boomerang back to the last place they felt comfortable—often that riparian area that's the last place they should be.

Handler movements and positions that communicate "herd leader" to cattle allow those cows to transfer the comfort they felt in their last pasture to the next one, Cote says. Rather than scatter, they stay in relatively tight groups—improving forage management and breeding opportunities and slicing to a fraction the manpower required to manage and move them.

Management-intensive grazing isn't the whole answer—says Cheyney, "but the people who have gotten it together have been fairly successful."



Lynn and Susan Steadman steered into growing turfgrass and selling it retail.

different aspects of the operation will probably have a more positive impact than one major change."

At Bancroft, WIRE participant Carl Hatch plans to rotate his pastures more often and manage grazing on the smaller pastures more intensively. WIRE "helped me look at the different phases of our operation and think about different things that we might need to do," he says. Through evolutionary—not revolutionary—changes, he hopes to keep the fourth-generation ranch in the family and eventually include one or two of his sons.

The grass on his side of the fence started looking greener when Lynn Steadman added turf to his livestock and crop enterprises in 1993. But it wasn't until the third-generation Raft River producer transitioned from the wholesale to the retail end of the turf business that his bottom-line began to green up as well.

"People said I was nuts, that I had absolutely lost it, that I must have breathed in too many poisonous chemicals," he says. But the more deeply he involved himself in selling his product directly to its end-users, the more he adapted his product and its production to his customers' needs. Steadman now sells 350 acres of turfgrass into three states, giving up sugar beets this year for more lawn.

Still, he kept 50 head of mother cows simply because "it's in my blood. Honestly, there's no monetary remuneration from raising cows right now."

Steadman applauded his WIRE teachers for coaxing participants to "go outside the box and do something a little different. That's one of the keys to survival for production agriculture, especially for the small producers," he says. "Find a niche that's all yours."

For Ellis, who grew up on a ranch at the end of Freeman Creek in Lemhi County, the answer is ranching holistically. Ellis winter-grazes the family's cattle on leased ground near Hollister. He practices management-intensive grazing, moving the cattle frequently as a group. That provides a steady supply of nutritious feed, avoids reusing the same pasture during the same season year after year, and lands each year's new calf crop squarely on fresh, disease-free ground.

"I don't see a future in the conventional ways we've dealt with things," says Ellis, a 1984 University of Idaho animal science major. Instead, what Ellis hopes to develop is an agricultural operation that is "fundamentally sound from its social, ecological, and economic aspects and that is sustainable into our future."

"If we start looking at types of agriculture that make sense for the land, we're going to have to open up our minds and climb out of the boxes that we've been in for so long," he says. "But that doesn't have to be a huge ordeal. It can actually lead to positive, enlightening things that can help us fulfill our lives."

When families talk shop

For Joan Parr, Cassia County extension educator and a WIRE trainer, what's become increasingly crucial to the lives of Idaho farming families is optimizing their intra-family communications skills. Whether they know it or not, they're dependent on family team-building to not only keep the peace but to keep the farm.

Jim Hawkins, another WIRE trainer and Custer County extension educator, agrees: "I've seen too many outfits break up because there was no team there."

Only by identifying, appreciating, and supporting the various strengths each member brings to the family team will the farm or ranch achieve long-term sustainability, Parr says. Perhaps the thorniest issues of all are those associated with inheritance.

"In the past, people farmed and then they died," Parr says. "Now, the farm needs to support both an older family in retirement and a younger family that's trying to build equity and have a future as well. Parents have the guilt of not being able to pass along the farm."

Even when parents are willing to discount the farm or ranch so their children can buy it, the cash-out is "tremendous," inheritance taxes are staggering, bankers are often reluctant—and there are usually brothers and sisters to be bought out, says Richard Garrard, another Cassia County extension educator and WIRE trainer.

Generations of responding to each new day's fresh challenges have armed Idaho's agricultural families with ample flexibility to adapt to change, Parr says. But the question they're likely to be asking themselves each morning is, "How much longer should we do this? Are we doing this for our kids? Are our kids going to be coming back to the farm?"



Estate Planning: An Idaho Guide, helps Idaho families plan for the inevitable. To order the 42-page publication contact the UI extension office in your county or Ag Publications, (208) 885-7982 or cking@uidaho.edu