

TRENDS IN RANGELANDS AND RANCHES OF THE AMERICAN WEST

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INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing rangelands and ranching in the West could be characterized as wicked problems – complex, interconnected issues that resist straightforward solutions. In such systems, changing one part inevitably causes ripple effects throughout the rest, and even the best-intended solutions can generate unintended consequences in their wake. However, despite the complexity of these issues, ranchers and rural communities across the West are forging innovative paths forward. In the face of environmental and social change, hardworking and passionate people provide hope that whatever challenges the West faces, opportunity and resilience will continue to grow from the ground up – affirming the region as, in Wallace Stegner’s words, “the native home of hope.”

This perspective paper describes the future trends of Western rangelands and ranching through the perspectives of three Western rangeland professionals: Bre Owens, a livestock producer in Northern California and a dedicated partner in dozens of grazing collaboratives across the West; Kevin Watt, a regenerative agriculture consultant, rural hospice chaplain, and former rancher; and Jared Talley, a professor at Boise State University, rural Idahoan, and staunch supporter of collaborative conservation. Together, they combine their diverse backgrounds to critically examine how these trends impact producers, landscapes, and rural communities.

SUMMARY

Presented in its original conversational format with minimal editing, Bre, Kevin, and Jared discuss what they consider to be the “Top 10 Trends” impacting Western rangelands as of March 2025. A brief summary of the trends is presented first. The authors note that this list is not exhaustive but rather presents a snapshot of several issues and trends that can provide fodder for conversation among those interested in supporting resilient rural communities across the West.

1. CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change (both in terms of anthropogenic and natural cycles) is having tremendous impacts across the West – exacerbating water scarcity and the frequency and intensity of wildfires. Rural communities are at the forefront of these challenges and bare a high degree of burden for finding solutions. These challenges are compounded by divergent paradigms between such concepts as “wild versus human” and “conservation versus preservation,” with the valuing of one or the other prioritizing solutions that may leave the lives and livelihoods of rural communities outside of the scope of climate adaptation and mitigation agendas. To achieve holistic and equitable resilience, shared responsibility and place-based solutions must be prioritized.

2. EVOLVING WILDLIFE AND RANCHING INTERACTIONS

Given the benefits of rangelands for both grazing and wildlife, ranching in the West has always been deeply attuned to ecological systems. However, conflicts remain between wildlife and livestock, especially in the case of predators – leading to disagreements over when and to what extent preserving wildlife (either at the species level or individual animals) should take precedence over the security of livestock herds. This is especially difficult given the reduced populations of native ungulates, as well as the tendency to place higher values on charismatic megafauna over livestock.

3. RISING LAND COSTS AND LACK OF RURAL INVESTMENT

Across the West, land is becoming an increasingly valuable commodity. The result is higher land values with lower agricultural value – entailing thinner margins for producers, rural communities being priced out, and the entrance of a new (wealthier) class of people in rural areas without a strong connection to the land or an interest in keeping the land in production. In turn, there is a lack of investment within rural communities exacerbated by newcomers in search of smalltown life but not

necessarily putting their dollars back into those communities (e.g., through exploitative tourism, the rise of Airbnbs, and online shopping).

4. SHIFTING GLOBAL DEMANDS FOR PROTEIN

Inevitably, shifts in consumer and market demands for protein have a profound impact on ranches in the West. Alternative proteins are becoming more popular – though perhaps more because of a focus on individual animal welfare than on holistic ecological sustainability. Globally, as people become more affluent, particularly in low and middle-income countries, the demand for beef will likely continue. However, these demands may focus less on quality and more on quantity, especially as fast food and convenience foods (e.g., meat sticks) increase in popularity and continue to drive consumption (and thus production) trends.

5. SUPPLY CHAINS AND LOCALIZING PRODUCTION

In contrast to the globalization of beef supply chains, there are pushes for local food procurement. Largely sparked by COVID, more people are interested in localization as a resilience strategy. However, the growing dichotomy between hyper-local and global supply chains is creating a situation in which there are an abundance of very small farms contrasting with conventional large operations, with the sustainable mid-size operation becoming rarer.

6. TECHNOLOGY OPPORTUNITIES AND DIVISIONS

There has been an abundance of technological innovations that can help ranchers make better decisions, including remote sensing, LiDAR, and virtual collars. However, these technologies are not neutral – considerations over who owns and controls data, who benefits, and to what extent local place-based knowledge can retain primacy persist and beg continued discussion. Moreover, while technology has the power to enhance awareness of issues facing the West, it can also promote extraction and lead to disconnection between people, communities, and the environment.

7. URBANIZATION AND THE THREAT TO RURAL COMMUNITY VALUES

Despite the West being dominated by vast rural landscapes, urbanization and urban sprawl are contracting what now can be considered as truly “rural.” More people are moving into rural areas who may not understand rangeland’s true ecological value, and companies without roots or investment in rural areas (e.g., Dollar General Stores) are increasingly entering and changing traditionally independent rural areas. Additionally, urbanization is having a cultural impact even in communities it has yet to physically impact. Mental health issues are getting worse, attributed at least partly to an increasing sense of isolation brought about by the reduction of community ties, financial stressors, a sense of political helplessness, and growing public disapproval for ranching as a way of life among the general public.

8. EMPHASIS ON COLLABORATION

The word “collaboration” has become somewhat of a buzzword. There are growing efforts for folks to work together across traditional sectoral and organizational lines across the West to instigate broader environmental, social, and economic change. However, in order for collaboration to be lasting and beneficial, all actors must show up, work together, compromise, and have shared responsibility.

9. PUBLIC POLICY PENDULUM SWINGS

With every new federal administration, new agricultural and conservation priorities are determined. Producers and rural communities are often caught in the crossfire of these swings, making it difficult to make long-term decisions. Additionally, decisions are made for the “greater good” that might also have a negative impact at a more local level – as is the case with the recent focus on green energy, which is rapidly converting rangeland and causing ecological and societal disturbance in many rural areas.

10. FEDERAL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS (MIS)ALIGNMENT

Cost-share and technical assistance programs are essential tools for supporting conservation. However, the design of many of these programs often fails to align with the unique needs of communities, likely a reflection of limited local involvement in decision-making, despite the dedication of federal agency staff. At the same time, tensions between conservation and production goals persist and need to be more openly acknowledged. It's also important to recognize that so-called "voluntary" conservation isn't always fully voluntary—ranchers operate within a web of external pressures, from international regulations to shifting market demands, that strongly influence their choices. Based on these trends, it is

clear that the future of ranching and rangelands in the American West is increasingly shaped by several external pressures—placing added strain on rural communities already carrying a disproportionate share of the nation's priorities. Addressing these challenges will require sustained, place-based collaboration with rangeland communities, grounded in trust, shared responsibility, and a commitment to actionable support.

The conversation below is a slightly edited transcript of a conversation that Bre, Jared, and Kevin recorded after months of talking, outlining, writing, revising, and talking again to understand, from their various perspectives, the current and future trends of ranching and rangelands in the American West. This conversation is, they state, simply Western collaboration in action.



THE CONVERSATION

OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE

Jared L Talley: The question that we need to start with is simple; what are we doing here?

Kevin Watt: That's a wonderful question to start with. Sometimes starting at such a fundamental level can open up new ways of thinking about and discussing an issue. Rangelands in the US make up more than a third of the country's landmass. They are essential for the health of water cycles and carbon cycles. They are irreplaceable habitats and provide for the cultural, nutritional, and economic wellbeing of human communities as well. However, with all that said, I don't really see a cohesive understanding in our country of how we want to or plan to coexist with these amazing landscapes. And so, I'm really hoping that the three of us can share our ideas, perspectives, and probably a lot of questions to help spur that conversation.

Jared L Talley: One of the things I really appreciate

about this work—maybe this is a broader answer, and maybe every generation feels this—but things are changing fast, and it's hard to pin down exactly what's happening. Across academia and government, you can sense this shift, like we're all trying to make sense of it in real-time. I think what we're really trying to do is provide some structure to help people think through these interconnected changes. And of course, that's going to look different for every person and every community because these shifts are experienced in unique ways. But for some reason, we're in a position where we're able to have this conversation, and more importantly, we're being supported in having it. That's what excites me—seeing what we can contribute to this bigger conversation.

Bre Owens: As we are starting this conversation, I'm feeling that my pessimistic side is outweighing my optimistic side today. This is feeling very heavy,

with the topics that we've laid out. One of those being an increasing lack of human connection to landscapes, and simultaneously more pressures on these landscapes and on these communities to produce goods and services. The question of who has power in conversations, and in decision-making for these landscapes and communities is only being given lip-service. My pessimistic view is that with the increasing pressure, we're going to need to have more of these conversations, which means the people who live in these landscapes are going to have more pressure on them to show up, meaning more pressure on their time when they're already spread thin in their efforts to steward land and community. And now they have to show up and defend and justify the work that they're doing because as we hear, "If you're not at the table, you might be on the menu." My optimistic view – this is the work, this is what we do, and we're going to continue to do it. As ranchers and rural community members, we are here for the long-term. We're fearful and skeptical, yet creative and empathic. We're pessimistic and optimistic. And we come together in community and understanding and compassion. And in doing that, we're going to keep figuring ourselves out; keep having conversations and learning, and hopefully we can do that together. And so, I think that's part of what we're doing here, is learning together and exploring these questions that are typical of complex systems.

Kevin Watt: This conversation needs both pessimism and optimism. The status quo is not working, and we should acknowledge that.

Jared L Talley: I really like what you said there—the honesty about coming in with a bit of pessimism but still holding onto optimism. It reminds me of that quote from Wallace Stegner that we have talked about so many times: "The West is the native home of hope." And I think that ties into something bigger—once we figure out how to really have these conversations, that's when the West will truly understand itself. That leads right into this next point about purpose and method; why we're approaching this the way we are.

Can one of you say something about how we came to these particular topics? The topics we are discussing could have been much different if different people came up with them, right?

Bre Owens: For me, it comes down to the nuance necessary to have meaningful conversation and move towards viable solutions. We've talked a lot about your framework of situation, problem, solution, and the importance of understanding at a deep level and from local perspectives what is happening on the landscape and in these communities. And then going a step further and recognizing that in our contextualizing of problems we must understand the values of those communities, and position that within the broader societal values that are shifting and moving and displaced from these landscapes in general. I think that's where we got to the 10 trends that we decided to focus on.

Kevin Watt: I think it's crucial to also note that trends naturally change and what we talk about now, in March of 2025, could be very different in April of 2025. Calling this the "Top 10 Trends" hopefully communicates to audiences that this list is not exhaustive and is just a starting point for a very big conversation.

Jared L Talley: That's the tricky thing about complex systems, right? Where you set the boundary makes all the difference. That's what actually makes it a complex system—there aren't any predefined boundaries. You have to decide where they are, and that's where it gets challenging.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Kevin Watt: We are seeing not just dramatic changes, but accelerating rates of change in issues around water, fire, and climate change on Western rangelands. This is seriously impacting communities of plants and animals as well human communities. In my work, I have seen a growing feeling of whiplash as ranchers try to hang on during oscillations between seasons of drought or flood. They are starting to feel that any year might break them.

Jared L Talley: This makes me think about the words “wild” and “human” because that distinction is such a big part of how we’ve structured our thinking. We label something wild to suggest it should be untouched, existing outside the human sphere of influence. But if we look at fire, water, climate change—these massive disturbances—we’re starting to collectively realize something Indigenous communities and land stewards have known for a long time: disturbance isn’t inherently bad. Fire, for example, can be a good disturbance when used correctly. Too much, and it’s destructive. The same goes for floods, droughts, and human impact itself. And livestock grazing. The real shift is understanding that the wild and human aren’t separate—they never were.

Bre Owens: On this topic of water, fire and climate change, the primary tension I see is a chicken or egg question. Is climate change driving ecological changes? Or is our management at both localized and global scales driving climate change? It’s also worth noting the snowball effect of it, where the two elements exacerbate the other, increasing the pace and intensity of change. When we tend towards rhetoric that places it in either one of those buckets, we’re doing the topic a disservice. When we only focus on climate change as the driver, we lose agency -- we lose sight of the opportunities before us to address management of landscapes and not harm human communities. And technological solutions tend to get elevated over nature-based strategies.

Jared L Talley: Something I’ve noticed in the rhetoric around these issues is how much of the burden seems to fall on rural communities. They’re the ones expected to create fire-adapted landscapes, store more water, sequester more carbon—basically, they’re tasked with fixing the landscape. But the way we talk about this makes it sound like they have more power in these decisions than they actually do. I want that conversation to distribute responsibility in a way that reflects real influence, because right now, it doesn’t. Ranching communities are working on this every day, but I don’t see the same level of responsibility being taken up elsewhere—especially in urban spaces. This isn’t about reinforcing an

urban-rural divide; if anything, I want to collapse that dichotomy. I just think we need a more equitable conversation that acknowledges the shared responsibility for these challenges.

Kevin Watt: I really appreciate that. Words matter, and it is comforting to draw these differences that give a sense of control or distance. We want to ask, “Is this a wild problem or a human problem?” or “is this an urban or a rural problem?” And so, at each point in the discussion, there is that temptation to draw some new boundary where we can separate ourselves from that challenge. However, that’s not how living interconnected systems work, and I really like that this conversation is actually about reconnection.

Bre Owens: Also underlying this conversation of resource management are our concepts of conservation and preservation. There are historical challenges, and more recent challenges within the social and political element of this. Acknowledging and understanding the history, and the fear that’s associated with the history of decision-making on these landscapes, is important as we move forward. Our collective responsibility (or ability to respond), to prioritize and make place-based decisions on management and resource use that very much influence water cycles and fire cycles, and ultimately, can help us build ecosystem and community resilience.

We hold in our history the legacy period of the 1800’s and overstocked western ranges. We hold the history of the Dust Bowl, and federal programs coming out of the New Deal era, which led to the formation of the Soil Conservation Service and Conservation Districts. There was a refocusing on conservation and the wise use of resources, while simultaneously society gained more control over water in the West than most imagined possible prior to the building of the mega dams. That time period completely changed how conversations about resource management and use were happening. And it was followed by a suite of environmental laws and rules that emerged in the 70s. With everything, there’s pendulum swings. And the pendulum swing has now

gone so far that conservation is synonymous with preservation in many conversations. And that was never the intention of conservation.

EVOLVING WILDLIFE AND RANCHING INTERACTIONS

Jared L Talley: I think this leads into the next topic—ranching with wildlife. Wildlife has always been a marker of these big social and ecological shifts. A hundred years ago, our relationship with predators led to their extirpation from the landscape. Now, we're seeing their restoration, and with that, the lines between restoration, conservation, and preservation are blurring. The challenge with wildlife is that they're so visible. And I don't think we can separate that from our changing relationships with domestic animals—our pets have become family, which influences how we think about wildlife. At the same time, biodiversity loss is happening at a global scale, and we're caught in this pendulum swing between loving wildlife and harming it. One thing that really frustrates me in these conversations is how often people fail to distinguish between wildlife as a species versus individual animals. Saving a species and saving every individual are two very different things, and that distinction completely shifts how we think about conservation. I'd love for more people to be clear about where they stand on that—it changes everything.

Kevin Watt: It makes sense that conservation organizations use beautiful photographs of animals to evoke emotion. It touches our natural empathy. But communicating in that way sadly neglects hard to see elements that are also important. Thinking on a species or ecosystem level can take us beyond just empathy and into a space where we don't need to justify the existence of an animal or a plant by how it makes humans feel. The conversation around predators is an example of this. Dealing with it just at the emotional level can make it feel like a fight between good guys and bad guys. In that frame, it is either callous urban folks destroying ranchers' livelihoods or blood-thirsty ranchers killing wildlife.

Jared L Talley: I wonder why pictures of ranchers don't always evoke the same empathy as pictures of wildlife.

Bre Owens: Oh, I think sometimes they do – the images of the cowboy on horseback, or of ranch kids amidst a wide-open grassland, can evoke some pretty strong emotions, but maybe not empathy. We have another trend coming up in our discussion today about public perception and the displacement and recent re-placement of people in rural landscapes. There's also the Yellowstone challenge and before that, there was John Wayne. We have a fascination with rugged individualism and rugged places.

But going back to, what's the big crux of the wildlife topic? It seems there are two primary themes to the wildlife conversation. One is where livestock and wildlife are perceived as being in a state of conflict. And that's easy to see with large predators and livestock, maybe less magnified with native ungulates and livestock, such as elk and cattle. And then on the flip side of it, there's the complementary relationship that we see with livestock -- between birds, pollinators and such. Livestock, and their grazing and foraging behavior, are being recognized as a biomimicry strategy, particularly in today's context of increasingly fragmented landscapes where native ungulate populations have decreased and are no longer performing that role. However, where biomimicry discussions fall short, is the provisioning aspect of western landscapes. In our current context, native ungulates are legally and logistically not a readily available and reliable protein source for society, but range livestock are.

Rural communities and ranchers are caught in the middle of the real and perceived relationships between livestock and wildlife – the synergistic (opportunity focused) and the competition or conflict (challenge focused) conversations. So, depending on what conversation you're sitting in, you're either the hero or the enemy, and both are daunting.

Jared L Talley: I've heard you talk about this before, Bre, and it goes back to that question—why does anything need to be called wild? Life is life, right? Cows, ranchers, recreation, wildlife—it's all life. Maybe making these distinctions does more harm than good. At the end of the day, it's all about sustaining life.

Bre Owens: One other piece of this that is important within the wildlife conversation is the different actors that show up and how they show up. Acknowledging who has power in the conversation and how that power is being derived, between conservation groups, environmental groups, green energy advocates, and the people who live in these places, just to name a few. It's difficult to connect the mechanisms to the levers.

Jared L Talley: I don't know for sure, but I'd guess that if you track how these groups are funded—not saying good, bad, or otherwise—you'd see they're pulling from different sources. It's a lot easier to get national funding for charismatic megafauna than for something like slickspot peppergrass, and that influences how these groups show up. I think this is intimately tied to trends in land and home ownership. Who lives near these rangelands and who doesn't—how does that change the motivations of different actors working in rangeland conservation?

RIISING LAND COSTS AND LACK OF RURAL INVESTMENT

Kevin Watt: The land crisis feels like it has been growing for decades. It's a huge shift in how we view and value rural land, who has access to it, and what we think it is for. We're watching as so many working ranchers can't remain in the communities their families have called home for generations. Land values can easily be five to even 10 times more than their agricultural value. It worries me because it doesn't feel like it is intentional or that we've considered the tradeoffs to letting it happen. I don't think the market will bring an inevitable balance because there isn't a widespread understanding of the full costs and benefits that rangelands provide.

This is true ecologically, but I also think it is true socially. Markets don't care about the stories of the individuals, families, and communities. I find that very troubling and the problem is likely to just keep accelerating and getting worse, and the emotional toll is already very high.

Jared L Talley: I always come back to that phrase we hear a lot—farmers and ranchers being cash poor and land rich. This ownership issue cuts right to the heart of that. Land has been the one thing folks could rely on—their equity, their retirement, their sense of stability. And now, that's slipping away too. They're still cash poor, but now they're not even land rich. And honestly, I don't know how land rich many were to begin with—land only holds value if there's a buyer. But now, there are buyers. Historically, when people who work on the land don't own it, it doesn't tend to end well. It creates weird incentives, breaks down communities, and shifts control away from the people who are actually stewarding the land. Some folks are hopeful that leasing could help younger generations enter agriculture. Maybe. But I'm skeptical. I'm worried about what we lose in that transition.

Kevin Watt: Sadly, Jared, the problem goes back even more than 1,000 years. We can see the political, economic, and social consequences of concentrating power over land into the hands of just a few across human history. I think much of the public does recognize and prefer the generative relationship that individual ranchers and the farmers have as they tend to a piece of land because they and their livelihood are intimately connected to it. It is so different from treating land as just an investment.

Bre Owens: This is a big, long term, human challenge that we face. And it's interesting that we think we're so evolved in these modern times, yet we reconstruct old power systems through new versions of colonialism disguised as an environmental movement or global marketplace and held up by ideals of efficiency and progress. In addition to land access challenges and disconnection from land, there is a lack of rural community profit and the reinvestment in people and place that comes

from it. Essentially, we have an economic system and national culture built on extraction from these communities and these landscapes – livestock and timber, mineral resources, gas and oil, and now wind and solar installation. Urban communities, global food companies, and other industries are both dependent on and exploitative of the natural resources and communities that manage and produce them. It creates this really deep conflict of how we think and value these landscapes as a society.

Kevin Watt: It brings us back to this notion of constantly trying to cut up issues into simpler parts. Are you in the good bucket or the bad one? The wild or human, the urban or the rural, the villain or the hero. If we are going to change how our species and culture interact with the planet and each other, we need to recognize and investigate our remarkably persistent tendency to create ingroups and outgroups.

Jared L Talley: People often forget that the antonym of “civilization” is “wilderness.” They’re framed as opposites. Civilization in the European world has historically been seen as the good, and wilderness as the bad. I’ve also been thinking a lot about the word “extraction.” It’s technically accurate, but it carries this sense of malice. We don’t usually say “production” with the same weight, even though both involve taking something from the land. But the meaning behind those words is really different. And when we talk about collapsing dichotomies—rural communities aren’t just living on the land, they’re of the land. So, when we say something’s being extracted, it’s not just the land—it’s people too. Production implies some kind of reciprocity. Extraction doesn’t give back, and that’s what makes it so troubling.

Bre Owens: Yes, with production there can be a reinvestment in that place, in those people, in those communities, and there can be community wealth building, but when it’s just pure extraction, there is no reinvestment.

Jared L Talley: It makes me think of Airbnb. What started as a way to rent out an extra bedroom has turned into this extractive process that’s pricing people out of their own communities—especially in rural areas. Folks can’t afford to own or stay in their homes anymore, while outsiders come in and use these places as recreational or environmental amenities. It’s turning the community itself into a resource to be extracted from, and the return to locals is minimal, if anything.

Bre Owens: Yes, and the glorification of smalltown life. People love to visit these places to “slow down” and “connect to nature,” which fosters another form of extraction – the concept of recreational economies, which are essentially just service economies. And as rural communities we are supposed to be grateful for the economic activity generated by serving coffee to tourists and mountain-bikers, and for the 20% tip. I’m not convinced the revenue generated is covering the wear and tear on rural resources and mental health – a lack of sufficient profit associated with this type of economic activity seems to be resulting in a lot of deferred maintenance.

SHIFTING GLOBAL DEMANDS FOR PROTEIN

Jared L Talley: One big shift we are seeing is the changing demand for protein. Two thousand years ago, people were generally fine with eating livestock as far as we know, but that’s shifting now, and it’s creating new pressures. So, this brings up a big question about global beef demand and alternative proteins.

Bre Owens: Yeah, I think this one is interesting, Jared. There are statistics around supply and demand for proteins – of the animal variety and alternative variety -- and the values-based perceptions and messaging that have evolved over time often seem to be in contradiction. There’s the general understanding that as economic opportunity rises globally, demand for meat will also rise. Historically however, rural people had access regardless of economic status because they raised or hunted

their own meat. And then there are the advocacy driven perceptions of demand, and over-simplified messaging of meat being bad for the environment -- that in order to address climate change we need to lower our consumption of meat. And I don't know, does consumer data actually represent what's going on via purchasing power?

Jared L Talley: The whole conversation around things like the Impossible Burger or lab-grown meat seems to focus on saving an individual cow, rather than thinking about the system as a whole. The energy and inputs it takes to produce lab-grown protein don't seem to be helping the broader natural system—like rangelands or grasslands. It's more about sparing a single animal than supporting ecological health. Personally, I don't have a problem with lab-grown meat itself—whatever, eat what you want. What I do have a problem with is how it's shifted the conversation. Like you said, Bre, it's not going to change global demand anytime soon. But suddenly, because there's a tech alternative, it becomes, "Well, we should just stop beef production altogether." And that really worries me. It erases the nuance. I can value innovation and the communities and land management practices tied to livestock. We're not holding those ideas in tension anymore—we're just pulling them apart. And that's what worries me.

Kevin Watt: I've seen that too, where we engage only in a simple conversation of "who's right and who's wrong?" We're regrettably not asking "what makes life more wonderful, what is enhancing the overall system?" It's remarkable how quickly inclusive system-level ideas like sustainable or regenerative can be co-opted to bring us right back into a simplistic and dualistic fight. I remember how the growth of grass-fed beef felt like it was starting a beautiful conversation about how our food choices influence the ecosystems that we rely on and love. And then in just a few years it became just a popular mark of prestige, or a way to bypass difficult questions that need to be discussed.

Bre Owens: Global beef supply and demand, and the movement of product around the world

has historically been driven by perceptions of "quality." The rhetoric has been that with access to a global market, the US ranching industry has more opportunity, because there is demand for high quality products and we produce the highest quality, highest value beef in the world. I think that's shifting tremendously right now. Shifts are tied to the global supply of feed inputs, corn, and other products. It's also tied to shifts in flavor profiles that people are seeking, and the environmental relationship of different production chains, but also this interesting trend in the demand for ground products. When you start thinking about the number of burger chains, from McDonald's and Burger King to Shake Shack and Five Guys, the demand for grind, and other convenience products like meat sticks, which are blended products in terms of quality, has big implications.

Jared L Talley: How does all this intersect with the supply chain and U.S. beef herd inventory? I suspect this is a big driver of change on Western rangelands, but I'm not sure how it all works.

SUPPLY CHAINS AND LOCALIZING PRODUCTION

Bre Owens: I think what's important to recognize as we sit in these circles trying to find feasible solutions for rangeland conservation, is that we typically focus on the rural community scale. So, yes, we may be paying attention to the price of live cattle and how that influences the economic viability of ranchers and rural communities we work with. But we don't typically address larger market drivers and don't fully recognize how much influence it has on each individual rancher or each rural ranching community across the West. It's hard to hold all of that context and all of that information, and to make the connections when our collective focus is mostly on ecology, and sometimes the people.

Jared L Talley: A global market changes our priorities. If the goal is to meet global demand, then we're always chasing more—producing more, scaling up constantly. But very little of that value trickles down to the producers, the ranchers, or their communities.

As we globalize the economy, the value tends to concentrate at the top, which makes sense if that's the national priority. We know a few big companies control most of the supply chain, and that creates its own set of challenges. What if we limited demand to the local or regional level instead of chasing endless global growth? You're seeing it already: smaller butcher shops, more localized production. That shift lets ranchers keep more of the value and operate in ways that better fit their landscapes and communities. It's happening, but it's still up against a much larger system with very different priorities. I'm not sure where it'll go, but there's definitely momentum toward supporting local.

Kevin Watt: I'm seeing it partly too, but I would add that the supply chain is also wildly misunderstood by the public. It's so difficult to see how intentionally centralized it is and how it's been crafted by large companies to extract as much of the value as possible. Small farmers and ranchers that don't fit or don't play ball with the system have very few other options to process and market their product. A rancher who is trying to do so may end up driving 12 hours to just find a slaughterhouse and pay far more per animal to have them processed. It's a really interesting moment because I think that the average person would assume that the rancher gets most of the value because they are providing the animal. The animal they are providing seems like the biggest thing, and yet the majority of the power and financial benefit of their product is thoroughly out of their hands.

Bre Owens: There are big pushes on the ends of this spectrum with one side being a movement to build resilience through local and regional food systems, and the other side doubling down on the supposed efficiency of scale. It is sad that it took COVID for a lot of these conversations to gain traction, and it is even more sad how quickly we seem to have forgotten the flaws in the system that became evident during a time of crisis. It also seems that in regard to ranch operations, the small are getting smaller, the large are getting larger, and the middle is disappearing. The mid-size, economically viable family operation

that makes a living from ranching is disappearing. I don't know what that's going to do to this industry, our relationship with land and communities, but it's definitely going to impact it.

Jared L Talley: Yeah, it feels like that's its own trend—the middle is getting pushed out in so many ways. You see it with the middle class shrinking, but it's also happening in agriculture and land ownership. That middle space—moderate-scale producers, mid-sized operations, locally rooted systems—it's getting squeezed between industrial-scale operations on one end and niche, hyper-local alternatives on the other. That pressure is real, and it raises questions about what kind of systems we're supporting and who gets to stay in the game.

Bre Owens: How do we decide, and who decides? Are the decisions based on data and models or based on understanding of the system? An example of how looking at only the statistics can skew our interpretation of a situation. If we consider the western US in the context of national feed and forage supplies and beef herd inventory, the West supports 20% of the national beef herd. Meaning, roughly half the US land base supports only a fifth of the national beef herd. On this data, one could make the argument that it's a poor use of the resource. But western landscapes are primarily arid and semi-arid, and they are meant for grazing. The plant communities evolved with grazing and browsing, and their ecological integrity and ability to cycle nutrients and energy (carbon) is tied to the role of the rumen. So, while the number of acres to support a cow - or the production capacity - in the West, is not commensurate with the Midwest and the East, the cow does provide an economically viable way to sustain many other heartbeats on the land in a modern context.

TECHNOLOGY OPPORTUNITIES AND DIVISIONS

Jared L Talley: And technology and new innovations play such an important role in this. Not always a good role, but an important one.

Kevin Watt: This feels like the natural next step because I hear us saying it is important at this moment to help people better understand their landscapes and ecosystems and access markets that aren't actively pushing the middle out. Depending on the day, I can feel both wonderfully hopeful and deeply saddened by the role that technology can play on our rangelands. It's amazing when technology empowers people to be in closer relationship with the land and do what is best for life as a whole. However, there are also technologies that further distance us from the land and each other and accelerate the game of drawing divisions.

Jared L Talley: Yeah, I see a lot happening with monitoring technologies—remote sensing, LiDAR, virtual collars—all tools that help us make decisions at scale. And while I know there's a ton of exciting work happening in that space, I have a hard time with technology. Not because it's inherently bad—there's a lot of potential—but because it often sneaks in a layer of control. There's a big difference between using tech to help people manage their own behaviors toward shared goals versus using it to control someone else's behavior to meet external objectives. That's what worries me. I think there's a real risk in seeing technology as a fix-all for the challenges of ranching in the West. It can become another way to impose outside solutions instead of supporting the self-determination of rural and producing communities. I want to see those communities trusted when they say, "Here's what we're seeing," even if it doesn't show up in the LiDAR. But without data behind it, I worry their experience won't be taken seriously. And that's a problem.

Kevin Watt: Jared, it's really worth saying that if the technology is meant to further a transactional relationship with landscapes, it can be remarkably harmful. But if technology can empower a closer and more sensitive relationship with the land, share new stories, or empower people to do acts of stewardship that were simply prohibitive in terms of time and capital 10 years ago, then that I think can be a very good thing.

URBANIZATION AND THREATS TO RURAL COMMUNITY VALUES

Jared L Talley: What you're saying about technology mediating and even removing our relationship with land and animals is really similar to what's happening with urbanization. More and more people in this country have no connection to the land or their food. And while I think a lot of folks are trying to rebuild that relationship, they've lost so much context they don't even know where to begin. That's where it starts to get risky. As urbanization continues, it's putting more pressure on rural and ranching communities—the very people who are still stewarding the landscapes we all depend on. And that disconnect makes it harder for those communities to do that work, especially when fewer people understand or value what that stewardship actually looks like.

Kevin Watt: I think urbanization is such an important trend when discussing rangelands. One measure I've seen says we lose an average of a million acres of rangeland each year. The value of rangelands isn't always recognized by the public. These are vital landscapes, but very often the focus of public discussions around conservation are on wetlands or redwood forests. There is at least a bit of hesitation to cut down a forest to build new homes, but I haven't seen many folks hesitate to drop a new ranchette or subdivision on a piece of grassland. I think that to address this problem we have to communicate to give people a felt sense of why grasslands matter.

Jared L Talley: Well, especially when it's done under the auspices of being closer to nature, right? Like, "I need to get out of the city, so I'll buy two acres, build a house, and feel connected to the land." But without an existing relationship to build from, that connection becomes more symbolic than real. And I say "I" here, but really, I mean the broader "we"—as a society, we're using these ideas of connection while still living in ways that disconnect us. We buy beef from the grocery store instead of raising it, lay down Kentucky bluegrass instead of native plants, and feel good when a robin shows up, even though

the sagebrush that used to be there supported an entirely different and important ecosystem. It's a fundamentally different relationship to the land—one that's extractive in a different way. It doesn't seem very productive. And if we don't recognize that and shift course, I don't think it ends well.

One thing I want to add around urbanization is that we often picture it as concrete and skyscrapers—vertical development. But I think urbanization is more of an idea than a physical form. It's about becoming self-contained—producing and consuming everything within that concrete bubble, without relying on the land beyond it. I'm seeing what I'd call rural communities that are just as urban in mindset, even if they don't look urban. It's this shift where people no longer need to get food from the land—they get it from the store. Services replace production, and that becomes the norm. And that's what worries me. You could sell a 600-acre ranch, and even if it still looks rural, it can become an urban place in terms of how it functions—disconnected from the land, operating under a totally different set of values about what it means to live with the land.

Kevin Watt: We carry our culture with us everywhere we go. Urbanization can also be understood as a state of mind. In my work as a rural hospice chaplain, I see the growing mental health crisis of rural producers stemming not only from isolation and fracturing communities, but also a growing feeling of alienation and hostility from the rest of our increasingly urban culture. They're experiencing suicide rates sometimes three to five times higher than the general public. Many feel that their values and their way of life are not just misunderstood, but maligned. The way that financial and political power concentrates as well contributes to not just feeling like they're being exploited, but they are failing. This is a real tragedy. So, it's something that I appreciate you bringing up that it's not just beautiful rolling hills that make something rural.

Bre Owens: You are both bringing up interesting things that I hadn't quite thought about. And I'm curious, Jared, are you meaning the dollar general

phenomenon? They're popping up all over in rural communities, but it's really an urban concept, of supplying a community with inexpensive goods and services that were not derived from that rural community or that landscape or that region. Yeah, it's a re-shuffling of the global supply chain. We also see it in the rise of Amazon, Temu, and online shopping in general.

Jared L Talley: And it's very extractive, right?

Bre Owens: Yes, the majority of the stuff in Dollar General likely came in a shipping container from the other side of the world. This relates to something you've brought up before Jared, that the concept of wilderness is such a privileged notion. The idea of setting aside land, or indefinite preservation, is dependent on our use or exploitation of other land and people, so that we might funnel in the goods and services that we need or want.

Maybe this is a place to touch on mental health and the stress of this work -- thankfully, we are talking a bit more about it. We are going beyond the challenge of land management, and well, this is not going to be succinct. From my own experience, I am feeling more pressure in managing the complexity of a ranch operation and business, but what's more overwhelming and depressing to me is that a lot of people don't see my value here and they don't want me here on this land. They don't want my brother to be on the land he operates on, and they don't want my neighbors, ranching friends, and colleagues on the land. Because they are told by much louder voices that we are bad for these places and bad for the planet. That's more daunting and challenging than any of it. If someone or some group reading this thinks I should be here, and that my brother and my neighbors should be here, then I'd love to discuss how we are going to solve this one. Our focus on ecology and management is maybe missing the mark in addressing the root cause.

EMPHASIS ON COLLABORATION

Jared L Talley: Let's discuss collaboration as a trend, brief discussion on that.

Bre Owens: I think the crux, the big tension on the collaboration piece is when we come together in these spaces, more often than not, it seems that the conversation is centered around, how are ranchers going to change the way they are managing land? And so we have all these players, all these hats, represented in all these roles. And the conversation is always on the rancher and their stewardship and decision-making. And it is not on, how am I going to show up better as a researcher? How am I going to show up better as a convener? How am I going to show up better in my agency role? And so how are all these other hats going to serve that collaboration and that landscape better in what they bring to it?

Jared L Talley: I couldn't agree more with what you just said. And it brings me to the word "collaboration." It's definitely a trend—I hear more and more people saying we need to work together, build relationships, develop trust, grow capacity. And that's a good thing, generally. But like you said, there's often this underlying assumption: "they" need to change, not "us." Throughout this whole conversation, we've been naming structural and systemic obstacles—global markets, urbanization, public attitudes—and yet we don't always recognize how we're part of those systems. People want to live in the rural countryside, but in doing so, they're adding pressure to the very communities they claim to support. It's not just on others to make the change—it's on all of us. Collaboration has to be more than a buzzword. It has to mean mutual responsibility and a willingness to reflect on our own roles. That's what needs to shift.

Bre Owens: This makes me think of the radical center and why I love the concept in its truest form. I was recently reading *An Invitation to Join the Radical Center*. It is critical that it has a specific call out, an invitation, for each of us in our various roles to show up differently and show up better in the conversation, in the work, and in the living we do. Whether you're showing up as a consumer, an agency staffer, an academic researcher, a rancher, or an NGO, whatever you are, there is a space for everybody to show up better in the radical center.

PUBLIC POLICY PENDULUM SWINGS

Jared Talley: Yeah, exactly—appreciating and celebrating our differences instead of trying to erase them. There's so much here that is impacted by policy pendulum swings and federal conservation programs too. I mean, we're living through a policy pendulum swing right now, right? One pattern I see pretty clearly is that left-leaning administrations tend to bring more funding for environmental efforts—but that often comes with rigid goals and frameworks that don't reflect the needs or realities of rural and ranching communities. On the flip side, right-leaning administrations usually bring more flexibility and alignment with rural values—self-determination, adaptability—but they tend to offer fewer resources and institutional support. So, rural communities are left swinging back and forth—sometimes getting more autonomy, sometimes more support, but rarely both. That constant shift makes it hard to build long-term trust or stability. That said, if we zoom out over the last 40 years, I do think we're moving in a better direction overall—but it's slow, and it hasn't come without harm to people and places along the way.

Bre Owens: I'm glad one of us is optimistic today, and I do agree with you.

I also think we are increasingly distracted and subdued by a combination of uncertainty and an expectation of government interventions. I think about the conversion of grasslands and rangelands and the efforts to create broader awareness and appreciation of these landscapes. Meanwhile, we still have massive conversion going on that is driven by ethanol markets and the aviation fuel standard. But we're going to sit over here and have this myopic conversation about the importance of grasslands and try to convince a family living in Denver or Las Vegas of their importance, and ranchers don't worry, we're going to include you too, with a photo of your kid on their horse, and make it look really pretty. So, we're maybe moving one step ahead, while conversion has outpaced us by 10 or 20 steps because it's too politically fraught to talk about anything other than win-win solutions or rising tides that lift all boats.

Kevin Watt: Bre, you are right. It really strikes me that in our political system, it's very easy to feel comforted by what are just platitudes and photo ops, while under the surface there are deep and hard to see trends in policy like biofuels that have very harmful impacts on things we care about. Since they are so subtle and take long investments in lobbying to change, they often aren't discussed or even recognized.

Bre Owens: We are trading coal, oil, and gas production for lithium mines and solar and wind installations, as if they are somehow less destructive on the landscape. And somehow rural communities are less impacted by the boom-and-bust cycles of these industries as the previous industries. Is this really the extent of our ingenuity?

Jared L Talley: There's so much to talk about here and not enough time. What have we missed? What do we need to address?

FEDERAL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS (MIS)ALIGNMENT

Bre Owens: Federal programs – it's a topic we can't overlook in this conversation. What is driving these programs and the increased availability of them? How are ranchers accessing and utilizing them, which are two trends within a bigger trend. Circling back to the New Deal era, I think it's interesting to think about the building of mega dams across the West. Was the compelling reason for them a solution to water issues or was it that the country needed a massive federal investment to address the economic situation of the time – people needed jobs. So, the Commodity Credit Corporation was formed, and massive federally-funded projects were implemented. Maybe the investments were a win-win, or maybe they weren't.

I think about this with the current technical assistance craze and federally subsidized programs, such as drought insurance. Who is actually lobbying for these things, who is asking for them? Because it's not the average rancher that is asking for technical assistance or asking for a third party to write them a

grazing plan or a wildlife habitat management plan. And who is benefiting? Insurance brokers generate revenue on each policy sold, regardless of the outcome for the rancher. Who sits at the table when these programs are conceived and designed? Who has both an economic reason and the time to sit at the table? What is the relationship between federal programs and the conservation industry? Whether we are looking at goods (food and fiber) or services (habitat, water, carbon) the current pathways for revenue are supply chains, and each segment stands to profit from a supply chain they design or insert themselves into.

Jared L Talley: Exactly—and what you're seeing now is that the conservation industry has become its own thing. It's often talked about like it overlaps perfectly with the production industry, but it doesn't. It sits somewhere in between, and we need to start acknowledging that. You're seeing it especially clearly with the federal layoffs right now. And to be clear, I'm not saying I want anyone to be laid off—there's a lot of nuances there. But it's revealing something important: conservation, as an industry, is dealing with a different kind of rotation or cycle than production is. It has its own momentum, its own interests, and it wants to keep going—even when it's not directly tied to production outcomes. That distinction matters, and we don't talk about it enough.

Bre Owens: I think another piece here is the term voluntary – we like to talk about voluntary conservation efforts. This is one reason why NRCS is so appreciated. Survey data on how ranchers access information and financial assistance tells us it's primarily from Cooperative Extension, NRCS/ FSA and industry groups, which makes complete sense from an alignment of values standpoint. But more and more I see "voluntary" being a descriptor from other groups in relation to the programs they are promoting, when in reality, ranchers are backed into a corner and their options have essentially been limited to an either/or choice due to regulation or market structures. An example is predator conflict reduction or emerging elk occupancy agreements.

When viable management options are taken off the table (or landscape), it makes us feel good to say, well, this new program is a voluntary conservation opportunity for landowners.

Kevin Watt: Bre, I love what you just said. Even “voluntary” can be a misleading platitude when we are still playing the game of who’s part of the ingroup or outgroup. There are ways that rangelands really suffer from the frames we use to understand them. These divisions can easily back these communities into a corner of having to meet some implicit or explicit coercion. What I’ve heard in this conversation that brings me a little bit more into the optimistic space, is that we are taking time and effort to acknowledge that this old frame isn’t working. We’ve tested it for thousands of years, and now there are people and organizations who can and will call out that it’s not serving the community of all life.

CONCLUSION

Much was discussed here, but much more is missing. The future of ranching and rangelands in the American West is far from certain. In the broadest sense, we know population growth in the urban centers of the region – and the recreation pressures it brings – will challenge these systems. We know that our ecosystems are changing, ranging from global climate to sprawling suburban development. Water will be a persistent challenge for the West. And we know that rural rangeland communities in the West are working hard to meet these challenges for the benefit of all, but also bearing the brunt of many of the nation’s priorities. We are in a period of change, and managing change is difficult.

We end this project as we began; to face these challenges will require genuine collaboration with rural range communities, a willingness to listen and believe these communities when they speak of their experiences, and those who wish to positively impact western rangelands to show up in community, pick up a proverbial shovel, and get to work.

