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Disease Outbreak: How Ranchers Might React

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What might happen if a major disease outbreak and/or act of agroterrorism occurred on a ranching operation? Though it is difficult to predict the emotional reaction of individual ranchers, by looking at the nature of ranching and the impact of tragedy on individuals, we can gain a better understanding of how ranchers **might** respond.

Changing Nature of Agriculture:

“Increasingly, urban people ask why they should bail out farmers suffering misfortune when other businesses in the same situation are not. After all, farmers choose a rural life and participation in an industry subject to the whims of nature.”

This attitude, expressed by many “non-agriculturists”, leads ranchers to express a sense of **‘Loss of Country-Dominance’**. Country-Dominance refers to a core belief of the superiority of rural life. It believes in an ideal that country life is more productive, more cherished and more respected than city life. Until the past few decades, country-dominance was prevalent. Ranchers controlled land resources; they provided a strong influence on the local economy; they experienced great political clout; they enjoyed great social status and they provided strength to the rural ideology.

But this influence has shifted dramatically. Today, ranchers are often accused of degrading their own land. Many decisions regarding their use of the land are made by agencies and individuals far removed from ranching. This often leads to a lack of public support for ranching operations. And, due to reduced numbers of ranchers, their political influence has diminished. Finally, where they once experienced social status and wealth; many are barely hanging on. This loss of country-dominance manifests itself in many ranchers through a sense of **“ambiguous loss”**.

Ambiguous loss is the stress of not knowing what is happening or what might happen, not knowing what one is doing wrong, what one can do to fix the situation, not knowing if one can prevent total loss. The ambiguity, more than the event of loss, can immobilize and depress. The stress for ranchers is complicated by an ambiguous threat toward a way of life, the loss of a lifestyle connected to the land. If a disease outbreak were to mean the loss of the herd, this would create an even greater sense of loss.

“Few city people are aware of what the loss of a herd of animals would mean to a rancher.”

When that lifestyle is threatened, or lost, and the future is uncertain; worry, confusion, conflict, shame and anger can surface.

A second concept that illuminates the changing nature of agriculture is **Ranch Preservationism**. This is an attitude that being a rancher leads to a higher well-being than other methods of making a living. As a business with little economic justification, ranching exists because ranchers like what they do and are willing to sacrifice to continue; even through the massive difficulties of insecure tenure, limited profit, an increasingly hostile environmental movement, and a sense that time has passed them by. Some might simplify the whole argument and describe ranching as “a calling”.

For many ranchers, their work is their life, a life they plan to continue until it is taken away from them or future generations no longer can keep the ranch functioning. As outside pressure increasingly impinges on this fundamental value, many ranchers display an open defensiveness and anger towards those they perceive threatening their way of life. For example, a New Mexico rancher reacted angrily to a Forest Service decision to cut cows on his grazing allotment on forest wilderness:

“What’s it going to take – me sitting on my front porch shooting the next son of a bitch that tells me when I can and can’t move my cows?”

The Nature of Tragedies

Whether called tragedy, trauma, or crisis, these types of occurrence place individuals at risk for significant psychological upheaval. The word “trauma” indicates a shocking event. When events occur *suddenly and unexpectedly*, they are more likely to create trauma. Even though events that happen gradually and are not expected to be highly stressful—can be; it is harder to adapt under difficult circumstances when there is insufficient time to prepare psychologically.

A *perceived lack of control* over an event also causes trauma. Many of the tragedies we face are not under our control. The impossibility of controlling events, such

as the death of a loved one, a natural disaster, a disease outbreak, or a car wreck, leads to a feeling of powerlessness and challenges us psychologically.

Events that are *out of the ordinary* are more difficult to cope with. These events occur suddenly and, again, leave people sensing a lack of control. Another characteristic of traumatic events is the *degree to which they create long-lasting problems*. Many of the minor problems of agriculture are reversible. If you get hailed out, you can re-plant. If you argue with your spouse, you can make up. But if you lose an entire herd of animals, the results may be irreversible. Circumstances that cause long-term impacts will lead to greater psychological distress.

Effects of Tragedy on the Individual

Not everyone will experience trauma following a tragedy; however, many people experience certain expected responses.

Effects on thinking. When the tragedy is sudden, initial reactions of shock, disbelief, and numbness are common. For many, thoughts of the tragic event consume their thinking. It is common for visions of the tragedy to constantly “pop into the mind” of the survivor. Another effect on thinking can be a loss of self-confidence. Being exposed to negative events can decrease one’s self-confidence; especially in the first days following the tragedy.

Effects on emotions. For persons exposed to a tragic event, fear and anxiety are the major emotional responses. Depression is also a common response, especially if the tragedy involves a loss. Anger is a common emotion for those experiencing a tragedy and it can be directed toward those believed to have caused the tragedy. For example, a rancher who is foreclosed may return to a lending institution with violent intent.

Effects on behavior. When individuals face difficult situations, increase in drug use may occur. People may use or misuse prescription drugs (to combat depression for example) or increase alcohol consumption as a coping strategy. Although increased drug use is not necessarily negative (as in prescriptive medication), it has an impact on behavior.

Many times, individuals facing tragedies withdraw from others. They may also be hard to be around, which exacerbates the withdrawal. Some people respond to tragic events with aggressive behavior. Adding alcohol or other drugs to the mix can lead to violence, abuse, or other destructive behavior. Increase in verbal and physical violence is sometimes a reaction to a tragic event.

Effects on worldview. People live life with basic assumptions. These assumptions provide the means of making sense of the world and providing the confidence to undertake life’s challenges. These assumptions also provide a sense of safety, security, and protection. Traumatic events shatter these assumptions.

Nothing seems to be as the survivor had thought; the inner world is in turmoil. Suddenly the self- and worldviews that were taken for granted are unreliable. No longer can it be assumed that the world is a good place. What happens next may not make sense. The very nature of the world and self has changed.

“You see farmers along the country-side standing in piles of their livelihood, in piles of dead animals and the stress is just immense.”

(Comments from a South Wales farmer in reaction to the Foot and Mouth Epidemic in the United Kingdom.)

Increased Probability of Violent Behavior

In addition to that mentioned above, there are other risk factors that increase the potential for violent behavior in ranchers; either toward themselves or others.

- **Age:** Older men are at greater risk for suicide. The average age of ranchers and farmers is approaching sixty years.
- **Identified Depression:** In 20% of suicides, the victim has previously been identified as clinically depressed. Adding high chemical or substance use exacerbates the situation.
- **Physical Illness:** Those who are terminally ill or have suffered severe injury are at greater risk for suicide.
- **Access to Means:** Firearms—agricultural chemicals—barns and ropes. During the foot and mouth epidemic in the United Kingdom, law enforcement disarmed the farmer and surveyed the farm before destroying the animals; either to protect the farmer—or the emergency personnel.
- **Full Time Farmer:** There is a higher risk for suicide in those farmers without off-farm employment. There is no distraction from the situation and less hope due to lack of alternative income.
- **Lack of Diversification:** Likewise, those ranchers without an alternative source of income will be at greater risk if their herd is destroyed.
- **Familiarity with Death:** It is speculated that since ranchers have seen death in their livestock and/or have had to put an animal down; they know how to do it and often have access to the means.

- ***Continued Experience with Loss:*** British farmers experienced a Mad Cow epidemic; then decreased commodity prices; then lack of government subsidies; and then were hit with the Foot and Mouth epidemic. During the height of that latest crisis, one suicide per week was estimated in the agricultural population.

This article is not meant to suggest that all ranchers will be in crisis—they certainly will not—nor that they will react violently if forced to destroy their animals in the wake of a disease outbreak or agroterrorism incident. Hopefully this article conveys the feeling they have for their animals and the ranching lifestyle. It might also provide insight to those who would interact with ranchers in the event of a major catastrophe.

See: *The Personal Nature of Agriculture: Men and Depression* B-1104 and *The Personal Nature of Agriculture: Men Seeking Help* B-1134 for further information on the psychology of rural men: http://www.uwyo.edu/ces/LIFE/Personal_Nature_Main.html

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