

Dennis Hague and Piper Hayes: Ranch Life during the Pandemic

Video Transcript

PIPER: I mean, day to day, I don't think it's had a huge effect, like I think everyone was really scared at first, like we didn't know if the feed mill was gonna be closed or what exactly or if I needed a written note to get here. But then nothing really changed day to day, we're pretty isolated out here anyway.

DENNIS: The time of year came for us, we were calving. And if you're calving you're socially isolated anyway because you're spending all your time with your cows. So, at first it was just more of what you heard about things and you didn't know what really was going on. Probably the biggest thing was watching the markets, just watching the overall impact of how people's inventories, the value of their inventories, and people start talking and talking to your bankers about just what's going on. For most ranchers, cow calves guys, you're only selling two or three times a year and if you happen to hit it a day, like some of them did when they closed some of these packing plants, you get your head handed to you. A whole year's work was just you... You've lost money in one day. And there's gonna be investigations, people are gonna look at the packers and they're gonna look at what was going on. The market has come back up on the live side, but there's a limited number of cattle being processed. And so, that gives everybody a little concern about how long are we going to go because people are backing animals up.

Cattle that should be in the feedlot right now or on grass, and they're holding them. Well, that'll back up into the fall when we go to the feedlot in September or August and September, there gonna be cattle that should have been marketed that are gonna be there, and that's gonna impact us through probably until next spring. And then you had historic box beef price highs and people were calling and saying, oh, you guys are getting rich. (CHUCKLE) You're making all this money! And even packers made record margins on carcasses, but because they weren't running at full capacity, I don't know if they were any more profitable. I don't know if the uncertainty that it's causing people because they're telling don't do things, do the things we've always done and don't get crazy and try to out guess what's gonna happen because I don't know if anybody knows right now.

PIPER: Well, it's a little scary because like we sold cattle in January before everything got crazy and we won't really sell that cattle again until next January and we don't know if there's gonna be a second wave, like the feedlots are still gonna be backed up. It's like, we just don't know.

DENNIS: You know, as a country, I don't know if we've seen hoarding with groceries. I mean, nobody ever really thought that'd ever be a problem. And then once somebody heard of a problem and the stuff we hoard is really kind of strange, toilet paper, really? I mean, it's made

here and we produce all there... I mean, it just kind of boggles your mind, but... Long term impact, if you can't figure out how to keep people working in the processing plants healthy, I don't think processors are gonna build more plants, that's the profitability... I mean, we haven't built new meat processing plants for cattle. I mean, the ones we sell into have been around forever. They're updated, but... So, if those people on those lines get sick and they can't work and they're running at half production and they can only kill half as many cattle, this thing will stay with us a long, long time because that virus seems to like being in that cool damp. And if you've ever been in a packing plant, they're cool and they're damp, and it's a good place to grow things that like that kind of environment.

So, hopefully, if we can figure out how to test, monitor, trace and keep those people healthy, who knows? We might be down south of the border begging people to come up here and work on those plants because we may not have enough people. I mean, it might be like running teams in each week. You have to put a new team into a plant just to keep it going. It's a heck of a thing to say that you've got to jeopardize people's health, but until we get a vaccine, I don't know what else is going to happen. I listen to public radio and I watch NBC and CNN, and I watch I will watch Fox every now and then just to see what's out there. And then I read, but primarily it was more of what was being talked about nationally than what was being really discussed locally. Not until the governor shut schools down did it really get people starting talking about what's happening here. And then being close to Emporia like we are and then having an outbreak at the Tyson plant there. I mean, you knew people who either were or knew people who are working that had been tested.

And that kind of lets you, when they're saying, "Oh, testing is no big issue." People say, well, you get a test and they wait five days for results. Now we know, well, if you got that thing, you better isolate yourself. But then it was like, you got the test, people were still working waiting for results. Well, if they were positive, they just spent four days on the line, everybody else got it too. So, that was more local and it became very obvious that something's going on here. And then, like say we go to the feed mill to pick up feed and there's a sign on the door you can't come in. You have to stand outside the door and get on your phone and call 'em for an order that they'll put on the doc so you can load. And you go, "Yeah, I guess this is because this is happening." Well, I think when I go to town, I'll wear a mask. Well, I live in Emporia, so I go back there on the weekends and it's a little different. But I mean, I don't go anywhere except for the grocery store, basically, once it started and wear a mask.

And I mean, I'm around them too. So, I don't wanna be going out and about and bringing it back here. So, I mean, I try to be responsible, but I don't really do much anyway. I think at first everyone took it very seriously. I mean, Chase County, I was surprised they shut down the lake because so many people were coming from out of town to get away. And it seems like since we started reopening, I mean, you see tons of people at the stores and people having picnics and

parties. There are people that are my age that there's a lot of doubters. They got a lot of conspiracy, they think... And you listen to it and they'll look at me when I wear a mask and say, "Wait, are you afraid you're gonna get something?" And I said, "Well, it might be. You may need to be afraid of me giving it to you." But I said, "I'm four years in after having cancer surgery." And I said, "I don't want to take a chance because this thing seems to figure out what's wrong with you and then makes it worse." So I said, "I don't care if you think wearing a mask is bad." And did we overreact?

I don't know. It's interesting because Chase County, the Leader ran articles about the Spanish flu 100 years ago and how quickly after it went through the first time people just went back to normal and that came back in the second wave and it was worse than the first time. And so, maybe we have learned anything. Maybe we have to get bet on the head the same way. But it's a hard thing to swallow when you watch things happen and you feel like you have no control. I don't know if I could make myself get on an airplane. I mean, when I was working, I did a lot of flying. There's just no way, you're just in contact from the time you get to the airport to the time you get off that plane and get out of the airport, you're in just... You know, Susan was visiting her sister the week before they closed the schools here in Kansas and Arizona was not having any problems at that time, they are now, but in Kansas was really not having problems. And so, she thought go ahead and just go. But it was amazing, when she got off the airplane, I went to pick her up, we're waiting for her luggage to come around the carousel, and the guy was sitting over on the corner waiting by the carousel, sitting down and he was coughing.

It was smoker's cough, I've heard 'em all my life, but everybody in the airport at that carousel was looking at him like, "What are you doing?" And you go, oh, normally I wouldn't even give it a second thought. But you had to say, it could be. Is it possible? Well, who knows? It might become the new discrimination factor if you cough or sneeze. But again, we waited a month. Normally, after daylight savings, we go to play golf, I golf once a week with my brothers and cousins. And if we waited a month and then we waited until... Of course the golf course is closed. But then they opened up the golf course and we socially distance and try to stay... There are people that take it because, again, I'm playing with guys my age and all of us have got some kind of underlying health condition besides being 70 years old. And so, you're aware of it and you say, Well, OK, it makes sense not to take a chance until we know what we're dealing with. And now they're saying in China, the people that had it early are now experiencing other underlying health issues that they didn't have before.

Was it because of that? Who knows? Like, let's say, this thing, the unknown part of this is what scares everybody. As soon as we know more about it... And it's unfortunate it had to become such a political issue. I mean, health is health and safety is safety. And if the governor had to close things down to try to make things safe, even if she was wrong, I'd rather have it fall on that side than to come back and later say, oh, while this all happened we were changing a tire

out in the pasture and I caught myself on the head by a jack handle, hit me in the head, and...
(CHUCKLE)

PIPER: There was a lot of blood, in the middle of the pasture.

DENNIS HAGUE: And first thing I told her was if I pass out, tell the ambulance when you call, we're a half mile in off the road, which I shouldn't have said. (CHUCKLE) But anyway, we went to the emergency room after we got done. I'd stayed and changed the tire. I was already out there, I'd gotten smacked. I wasn't gonna do that again. So, I changed the tire and we got out and then I got back to the house. She cleaned it up, but it was still bleeding and I'd soaked it, I had a towel that I used to clean my hands after helping the cow calf. So, I stuck that on my head to keep it... and it was completely soaked with blood. And so, we had a chance to go to Marion because it's the closest hospital, went to their emergency room. And two emergency rooms. I mean, now you think about what happens if you had two or three people in the county get sick and have to go there with COVID? I mean, you're talking about Wichita, Emporia, and they're full already. I mean, some people don't understand, yeah, we might have the best health care system in the world, but it can only take care of so many people at one time.