

A Cooperative Commitment



Stacy Davies, marketing director for Country Natural Beef, closes a fence at his ranch in Frenchglen, Oregon. Stacy's ranch, along with 100 cattle ranches in 13 states, are member-owners of Country Natural Beef.

Photo by Lynn Howlett

Business model achieves dedication to members-owners in every industry

By Victoria Hampton

As the sun rises over the Steens Mountain wilderness, Hereford cattle meander across a rocky plain. Stacy Davies guides the cattle over the high desert terrain on his black quarter horse.

Stacy—the manager of Roaring Springs Ranch in Frenchglen, Oregon—has more in common with electric cooperatives than meets the eye.

Almost every aspect of Stacy's day is powered by the cooperative model. The electricity he receives from Harney Electric Cooperative keeps the lights on at his ranch, while the cattle network he belongs to keeps food on the table.

Stacy is marketing director for Country Natural Beef—a cooperative based in Burns, Oregon. Just like electric cooperatives, the 100 family cattle ranches that make up Country Natural

Beef are member-owners. Ranches are in Oregon, Washington, California, Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico, North Dakota, Colorado, Texas, Arizona and Hawaii.

The cooperative gives a voice to every one of its member-owners.

“The cooperative model allows us to capture the wisdom of everyone in the group,” says Stacy. “The intellectual capital is the primary focus at our meetings. We end up with 100-plus business owners in the same room searching out a solution, and it is a powerful thing.”

The cooperative world expands far beyond utilities. The business model covers companies such as cattle ranches, grocery stores, banks, hardware stores, dairy farms, housing complexes, credit unions, health care organizations, produce farms and breweries.

The main goal of a cooperative is to

Celebrating Co-ops and Public Power in October

Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the New Deal in 1933, which sparked a movement to light every home in the United States. This also was the beginning of electric cooperatives and the core principles that power this business model.

October is dedicated to celebrating the cooperative model and the member-owners who keep the lights on.

Public Power Week is October 4-10. It is a celebration of utilities across the United States.

Check with your utility about festivities during the month.

meet the needs of its members. One way this is achieved is through an elected board of directors that governs the cooperative, and sets policies and procedures implemented by management.

“We view each other as partners providing a high-quality product,” says Stacy. “The relationship allows us to achieve that, and that is only possible through a co-op structure. We have a great deal of transparency. Therefore, all votes rise.”

Country Natural Beef, electric utilities and all cooperatives adhere to the same seven cooperative principles: voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for community.

“The cooperative model empowers our member-owners because they are co-owners and are as involved or not as they want,” says Adriana Jones, front end and member services team leader for Quincy Natural Foods Co-op. “Members get to guide and direct the company.”

The Quincy Natural Foods and Feather River co-ops served by Plumas-Sierra Rural Electric Cooperative, receive 57 percent of their produce from local farms that is sold at the co-op’s stores in Quincy and Portola, California.

“We are committed to developing a sustainable community,” says Adriana.

One aspect that sets the cooperative business model apart is the unyielding dedication to the members, consumers and communities they serve.

“We host the Quincy Certified Farmers Market, collaborate with local businesses and agencies, host the local Community Supported Agriculture program, and support local growers and producers,” says Adriana. “We purchase whatever we can locally from office suppliers, hardware stores, local vendors, local banking, you name it.



Bill and Missy Craig's boat crew reel in salmon in Alaska. The Alaska Commercial Fishing and Agriculture Bank serves various industries, including fishing, mining, logging, oil and tourism.

Photo courtesy of Alaska Commercial Fishing and Agriculture Bank

“We have our Cooperative Community Fund, which is an endowment fund. We donate annually to local nonprofits who qualify.”

Cooperatives are ingrained into their communities through the industry and interests they serve. The Alaska Commercial Fishing and Agriculture Bank namesake is an example.

“Ninety-five percent of our loans are for fishermen,” says Chief Operating Officer Lela Klingert. “There are a lot of commercial fishermen in the Anchorage area. I would say 50 percent of members are in Anchorage.”

The 500 members of the bank represent the fishing, mining, logging, oil and tourism industries in Alaska.

“The ultimate goal, long term, is to be around and provide financing as an option for generations to come,” says Lela. “Being a co-op model is more than being the biggest or least expensive, but to be an option long term. I don’t know if you could achieve that as a private investor-owned company.”

Many of these cooperatives have members and customers that would be competitors if not for their cooperatives. Stacy enjoys the collaboration and sustainability of Country Natural Beef that is created through its network of ranchers, truckers, processing plants and customers.

“In the beef industry, all our entities are in competition with each other,” says Stacy. “The co-op structure allows each entity to focus on its own business.

Ranchers can focus on ranching. We get together a few times a year and make sure we’re all on the same page. We’re all pulling together instead of working against one another.”

As Stacy guides his herd of cattle into a holding pen, he is confident in the future of the ranch he maintains and the cooperative he serves.

“At the end of the day, it may not be the most profitable, but these businesses operate in a manner that our great-great-grandkids can still operate,” says Stacy. “We need these small communities to have the economic stability so they can be here for generations. It is more than the profitability. It’s the sustainability.” ■



Above, Front End and Member Services Team Leader Ariana Jones, right, helps a customer at Quincy Natural Foods Cooperative in Quincy, California.

Photo courtesy of Quincy Natural Foods