

## **Peter Goldmark - Double J Ranch**

By Ingrid Dankmeyer for the book: Renewing the Countryside: Washington

Sometimes you can go home again. When Peter Goldmark left the ranch he grew up on in the Okanogan Valley to go away to college, he didn't think he would ever come back. When he earned an advanced degree in molecular biology and was offered a job at Harvard, he was off and running on a different path. But before he started that job, he brought his wife back to the Double J Ranch for their honeymoon, and they never left.

“There are a lot of people who spend their lives at the bench, at the desk, or at the office making resources so they can run away on the weekend to get a little bit of what we have here all the time,” explains Peter. “So we learn to deal with the economic stresses and appreciate every moment where we are living and the privilege of living out on the land.”

“My father and mother purchased this place after World War II from the original homesteaders. My parents lived here about 20 years and I have been here 32 years. Times were tough when they started. Winters were tough. Buildings weren't like they are now, snow removal equipment wasn't anything like it is now, all the hay was in little bales, tractors were less reliable so they used a team of horses. It was a struggle. Some days were just flat out impossible; if the wind was blowing and it was minus 20 degrees and you were trying to keep the pipes in the house from freezing and feed and water the cattle, it was an exhausting experience.” Still, it was home.

“Once you grow up here, nothing else is really comfortable, and that is why I am here now. I knew that sometime I would go back into science, but when I came back the operations swallowed me. The place was kind of run down; my parents had been gone from the ranch for ten years so it had been run by non-owners, which is often hard on an operation. There was a lot of rehabilitation to do. It became clear there were some problems, and a lot of them were tied to soil conservation. So over the past 30 years I have made a lot of effort from a management standpoint to address those, and also to change the nature of the beef operation.”

Peter's parents had run a cow-calf and wheat operation. “The cattle operation has evolved into a grass finished yearling operation. We are working on developing local and distant markets for grass fed cattle. We feel very strongly about the nutritional and sustainable features of these animals: they are free-ranging on native grass, and when they are sacrificed it is done in a very respectful manner with calm conditions so that the product is as close to a pristine product as can be done. We have mostly local consumers now, but we are developing a web site to direct market.”

“Cattle prices are setting new highs. Wheat, on the other hand, is the same price it was in the early 1970s, so the economics of wheat are tougher. The main change I have implemented in the wheat operation is minimizing the amount of summer fallow, because summer fallow is when the land is most susceptible to erosion. I have developed a four-year rotation that I use when the moisture allows it. This county was almost always summer fallow-winter wheat country, but having half of the land exposed to wind and water erosion was unacceptable to me, so I added two crops of spring wheat into that

rotation. It gives me three crops in four years instead of two. It keeps the land covered in stubble an additional year, so it is fallow only one year out of four instead of two. I have added cross slope farming. I have added water control structures to take discharge from rocks and terraces to direct water away from the fields.”

Thirty miles of fencing and cross-fencing mean that Peter rotates cattle over the ground, never grazing heavily. “We’ve added pasture ground so that we have options for cattle and avoid the trap that many other landowners fall into in a dry year where the resource suffers with overstocking. We have a very complex rotation plan that protects the ground. It’s been another dry year, and if you fly over the country as I do on a weekly basis, you see areas where grazing has continued all year, and the ground is almost bare. We always rotate which fields are grazed in the sensitive springtime. When the wheat comes off, we move the cows in for four to six weeks. They enjoy the aftermath – some of the volunteers that come in the winter stubble, the grass and clovers that come up in wet spots, along with native grasses – so it is ideal pasture for cattle.”

Peter is interested in sustaining the native grass species that have thrived in this particular climate over generations. “Native grasses are really important, they are so well adapted to this arid semi-desert ecosystem. There is nothing better; time has proven it. My father chose this country because it was one of the last areas of native bunchgrass in the Pacific Northwest. He was really good at not overgrazing, so these stands have been maintained. The great value of bunchgrass is stability and ability to cover the ground reliably even during dry periods. When you take out the bunchgrass, you get invasive species that don’t grow as well during the cold weather. I think those bunch grass stands are beyond valuable, so I take great care of them. Even in a drought year, I’ll only use it lightly and if necessary I’ll cut down my herd size to fit the season.”

The 8000-acre ranch is close to evenly divided between pasture and cultivated ground. “The ecosystem here is really unique; it’s volcanically-based soil and then during the last glaciation things were scraped around so soil depth varies from zero to 30 feet. The soil varies from light sandy soil to heavy clay and they are as night and day to manage.”

Wildlife also has a place at Double J Ranch. “We’ve got things that fly, things that crawl, and things that run, and we enjoy them all. There are a lot of hawks and eagles here that do a lot of work for us and we appreciate that. Rodents are a big thing when you have a mixed operation of pasture and field, so from a pragmatic standpoint, predators of rodents are working in our favor. So we really enjoy our coyotes and our feathered friends that work on the rodents. Coyotes are only a problem with calves when we are not attentive. We have acreage that we keep as wildlife preserves and cattle haven’t been on it for 30 years: 120 acres below a bluff where there are a lot of bear and deer, and a 20-acre reservoir we created for game birds.” Cranes and geese are frequent visitors.

“In the late 80s I got the opportunity to go back into research at Washington State University. I did molecular biology and research into the genetics of wild species here to understand how seeds were able to remain dormant, with a long term view of understanding seed dormancy as a possible weed control opportunity. We learned a

tremendous amount about seed dormancy, though we didn't exactly answer the question. But it got me back into science.”

“In 1994 I decided to get into wheat breeding, and today we are right on the cusp of releasing new varieties that are the next generation of wheat that is snow mold resistant, winter hardy, and resistant to foot rot. Trials across state have done very well, and we are excited about the potential of these new varieties. They make winter wheat more productive.”

“For me what has been really rewarding – and I struggled with it for a while – has been the opportunity to bring both parts of my life together: the scientific part and the agricultural part. Through the wheat-breeding program, I am actually able to do something that has application not just here, but in other parts of the state. I finally found a way to do science here on the ranch.”

Peter draws on his farming experience as much as his scientific background in wheat breeding. “I think the talent is in selecting plants and stands that are going to be productive, resilient and successful, and I think that eye has developed in many farmers over years and years of experience with crops. I think I bring a rather unique blend of some understanding and talent in the science arena, and a tremendous wealth of experience. Ever since the age of ten I have been riding a wheat combine every summer, and that brings innate knowledge of the wheat plant and what is successful and what is not successful. If you do it for a while you understand some things.”

In addition to farming, ranching and wheat breeding, Peter serves on a handful of statewide boards, and even did a stint as the director of the state Department of Agriculture. “I am enthusiastic about the opportunity of finding ways to put value on products other than just what the mass market will provide. I don't want to be a producer just for the lowest cost; I don't think there is any future in that for agriculture or anybody else.”

“There are better things in life than money, and leaving the resource better than you found it is one thing we all should strive to do. What is unusual about this country is it is so young; the homesteaders only came here in 1918. My heavens, we haven't even been here 100 years! So we have the opportunity to treat it right.”