

In Irion County, and I suspect the same to be true in other rural counties, the State wants to raise taxes based on hunting income. Overlooked is the toll the weather and market failure have taken on herders. Stocking ratios are down so low in our parts that migrating buzzards never break formation until they reach the richer lands north of here.

Without the old-time livestock renditions, tax harvesters know little of the decrease in numbers in the county. Cases of de-stocking range from four-section ranches that have trimmed down to a couple of pet horses to one large outfit of some 276 sections having 275 mother cows left.

Two to three dollars an acre is probably a safe guess at the net income of a hunting lease in Irion County. Unlike in the hill country, the deer and turkey population won't support a red cap perching on every other tree limb with a deer stand in between. Agriculture income might show a gross profit of five bucks an acre if the rancher's salary for pumping oil wells and his wife's substitute teaching wages are called ranch income.

I can't tell what we make an acre at the ranch. My shearing contractor does the bookkeeping and files the tax

return. He knows first-hand how many sheep we shear and how many bales of wool we ship. While he's on the ground, I give him my count book to tally the livestock. All the deductions I need to show are the feed bills clipped on the pickup's sun visor and the gasoline charges stuffed in the glove box. Government subsidies cover the shearing and accounting expense, so that's a wash.

As close as I am to the operation, I couldn't explain to a tax collector or the likes of Oprah Winfrey how we stay in business. I just know the shearing contractor's vested interest in my survival is greater than that of a city-based accountant.

The biggest jump in income percentage-wise in the county has been the bounties on coyotes and bobcats. Every year, the club pays on more predators. Makes a nice sideline for a population as small as ours. Steady hands can show a good profit using the boss's pickup and time to run a trap line. Works a bit like a Ponzi scheme for the herders as we are the primary contributors to the bounty fund. Nevertheless, it feels good to take in a few dollars for nothing more than having a bit of fun.

Hanging over the future of the whole county is the news that San Angelo has appropriated \$20 million to buy or condemn the irrigation rights on Spring Creek. How much of

the 20 million bucks will be spent on our river is unknown as we have to share with Dove Creek and the South Concho River waterholders.

To further complicate estimating the proportions of the windfall, farmers are offering to lease the irrigation rights until the water shortages are solved in the Wool Capitol. The city manager refused that offer by responding, "I want to own the irrigation rights. I don't want to lease the irrigation rights."

Any time a worthy speaks like the great Roman politician and general, Brutus, saying "I" as in "I Brutus," the chances for negotiation grow dim. In fact, the light goes out for arbitration once condemnation or eminent domain is threatened. Still vivid is the memory of the Goodyear company tearing across the country offering ridiculous prices for a pipeline rights-of-way and threatening condemnation with an arrogance that'd make a South American dictator appear as timid as a junior high boy on his first date.

But if the farmers on Spring Creek lose or sell their irrigation rights, the irrigated farms will become dry gardens in reality. San Angelo may allow us to keep the dam the ditch company built in 1900 to use the city's water for a swimming and fishing hole as long as we don't splash too

much up on the banks and germinate a seed. Of course, I guess that'll be decided by the doctrine of eminent domain, which seems to read that the good of the urban public overrules what's good for the country people.

The feeling is in the air that the State plans to raise the property values of the county. I was going to write a letter to the appraisal office projecting the ranch's hunting and grazing income for 2003. But looking over the books, the shearing contractor did a better job shearing this season than he did keeping books.

Going to take more than a bookkeeper and a tax appraiser, however, to forecast the value of the irrigated farmland on Spring Creek. My hopes are that attorney fees and court costs become a big factor.