



Let's Talk Strategy

As the ag industry prepares for a leveling out on record-high calf prices, longtime ranch manager Burke Teichert shares his playbook for sustainable ranching.



by Kindra Gordon

Burke Teichert has devoted his life's work to the ranching industry. He was born and raised on a family ranch in western Wyoming, and his history includes serving as a university faculty member, cattle reproduction specialist and manager of seven cattle ranches for Deseret Land and Cattle.

Now retired, he continues to consult and to speak on the topic of ranch management, desiring to share his expertise to help ranches

be cost-effective and efficient. He says ranchers have four areas to manage: production, economics/finance, marketing and people.

With regard to the current focus on sustainability, Teichert says, "Sustainable means durable to me; socially responsible, able to last and persist over time." He adds, "If it's not profitable, it's not sustainable."

As a featured speaker at the Ranch Sustainability Forum held in Sheridan, Wyo., this past summer, Teichert shared his rancher's

playbook and offered some straight talk on ranching tactics.

Foremost, Teichert is an advocate of reducing overhead costs as much as possible and says, "You need some overhead, but most people have way too much."

He emphasized that while he has seen a "no input" approach work, he believes in a "low input" strategy for a ranch. His mantra is to have a "war on costs" and to analyze overhead and gross margin regularly. He adds, "If I can spend \$1 and get \$2 back, I want to, but you need to spend wisely."

To that end, Teichert says one of the top tactics to lower overhead is to replace "fed feed" with "grazed feed." "Reducing the ratio of fed feed to grazed feed can make a huge economic difference," Teichert notes and adds, "With some ingenuity, you can figure out how to reduce feed costs."

One strategy he has employed is to skip days of winter feeding so cows are inclined to graze some on the open range; otherwise, he says, "With daily feeding cows tend to wait for the feed truck."

Consider cattle traits

Teichert also emphasizes giving careful consideration to the kind of cattle selected for the ranch. His advice: Pick the toughest time of year you've got on your ranch and then select cows for that. He adds, "Do you have to feed them

to keep them in condition? If so, do you want their heifer calves?"

As well, he says, "Bulls never gestate or lactate, so if you have to feed them, do you want their daughters?"

Teichert prefers cattle with a small to moderate mature size and moderate milking ability. He says, "Most environments are not lush for long. So producers need cows to get through that."

Likewise, he says, "There's no room to argue milking ability. Anything beyond adequate milk is an expensive deal."

Bottom line: "I want a cow to reproduce and particularly rebreed. No trait is more important than rebreeding," says Teichert.

Along with the genetic selection consideration, Teichert advocates taking an approach that is both integrative and holistic — for the entire ranch.

Teichert says, "There's never just a single output. A systems approach to decision making enables a producer to see and consider unintended consequences."

To illustrate this approach, Teichert points out: High growth-rate bulls can eventually result in bigger cows; high milking ability cows may equate to less efficiency and a poor feed conversion, meaning a cow must eat more all year.

"Producers need to think all the way through their decisions

Grazing lessons

Grazing is one area that Burke Teichert says requires continuous tweaking on a ranch. He prefers a system that he calls, "planned, adaptive, time-control grazing." He says, "I can never go back to continuous grazing knowing what would happen to soil and productivity."

He advocates short-duration grazing with a lengthy recovery, and says, "I used to think twice or three times over grazing was ok, now I prefer one year or more for recovery." He also advises against grazing an area at the same time two years in a row.

But with irrigation, he says producers can regraze an area in 28 to 45 days. Why? "You can predict the next rainfall," says Teichert.

Bottom line, with grazing on any operation, he has found there is a learning curve for both producers and animals — if producers push the stocking rate too hard, land and animal performance can dip. **HW**



and have careful coordination of reproduction, genetics, grazing and marketing and understand when you change one thing it impacts the rest,” Teichert emphasizes.

More strategies

Another tactic Teichert advocates is planning. He advises developing good planning and decision-making tools.

“Ranchers must have good financial records and good production records,” says Teichert, who prefers to separate direct and overhead costs and enterprise accounting by cost category. Among the categories he likes to evaluate are weaned calf crop percent, pregnancy rates, weaning weight and yearling gain, and death loss by class of cattle.

He also emphasizes the importance of having a drought plan and a snow plan. That said, he stresses that a producer shouldn’t operate every year as if it’s going to be a tough one. “Have a contingency plan and implement it when needed, but so many economic opportunities can be missed if you operate like every year is going to be bad,” he says.

Teichert also says, “Place an emphasis on marketing and marry the production plan with the marketing plan.”

With regard to the cow herd, Teichert suggests: Put minimal inputs into the development of replacement heifers. He allowed a short exposure

for breeding (21-24 days) and says, “Those that get bred make a better cow and wean a better calf in the long run, and the opens make good feeders.”

As well, Teichert suggests managing cows for a short calving season and a long breeding season — he would leave bulls in with the cows until pregnancy-checking time. He reports that this method made a better cow herd, often with just a 30-day calving season, and he found a market for the late calvers and opens.

Along with that, he advises developing the self-discipline to cull. “Be attuned to that every day, especially from a commercial perspective. Opens, dry cows, wild ones, those that wean a poor calf or require help or extra work; have a list and then wait until the market is right,” Teichert says. He adds, “You won’t make huge genetic progress, but you will improve the efficiency and economics in the herd.”

Another tip: Take advantage of heterosis. Mother Nature doesn’t give many freebies, but heterosis comes close, says Teichert.

He also prefers to calve in synch with nature — which is later than most people calve, notes Teichert. That said, he emphasizes that each operation has to look at its own environment and situation to determine what that best calving time is.

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— *Burket Teichert*

Final advice

- Sell the hay equipment. “If you buy hay, you increase your carrying capacity, and you won’t have the urge to put hay up yourself if you don’t have the equipment,” Teichert says.
- Implement low-stress animal-handling techniques. Teichert says, “You can never get too good. The way you graze, and the way you handle animals will both make you money.”
- Use mindless time for strategic planning.
- When you do make a profit, invest it back into the ranch and invest in education. “Be a lifelong learner,” Teichert says.
- Strive to create an environment in which people want to excel and then provide the tools, training and freedom for employees to do so. “Be respectful of every idea from your team. You don’t have to agree with it, but you must be open to discuss and evaluate it,” Teichert says.
- Consider an operation with a high cows per person ratio — each employee is responsible for his or her own herd or herds. Large herds also facilitate grazing management, and it’s easier to check 800 cows in one herd than eight herds of 100 each, Teichert believes.
- Do accounting and inventory by herd, which allows employees to know their performance — and co-workers do as well. The result Teichert says is that “bad apples,” those who aren’t very good, typically leave. Also, with information and feedback, people start to ask one another “How do you do that?” They want to do better.
- Strive for continuous improvement of the key resources: land, livestock and people. Teichert emphasizes that this requires being adaptive and realizing that each situation is different. **HW**