

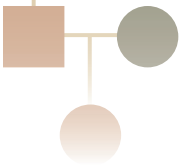


Herd Management *for the* Next Generation

Sustainability is key for herd longevity.



PHOTO BY KYLA COPELAND, FOCUS MARKETING GROUP



by Bridget Beran

Sustainability is a key buzzword in the agriculture industry today. However, its necessity is ever-present in proper herd management, especially when future generations are considered.

“Sustainability is being able to maintain your cattle operation with a steady food supply so it is vital that we have sustainable cattle production, not just from the cattle industry but from a food source industry as well,” says Jaymelynn Farney, extension specialist at Kansas State University.

While Farney says there are no set methods for maintaining a herd, being willing to think outside the box is vitally important to the longevity of a herd.

Sustainability defined

Iowa State animal science professor Dan Loy says one major aspect of sustainable herd management is to have the ability to make a living in a way that can effectively transfer those assets to the next generation, having a transition plan and working through issues about estate planning.

“If you ask most cattle producers about sustainability they’ll answer in some various ways about leaving the operation better than they found it,” Loy says. “But you also have to make sure that the next generation has the ability to adapt and change to be profitable and sustain what you have spent years building.”

Another important aspect to sustainable herd management, according to Loy, is treating the land in a manner that will help conserve it for years to come. Citing especially erodible land Loy said it is important that producers manage their ground in their pastures to retain soil and protect water quality.

“Environmental stewardship is vital for ensuring that the land is just as productive for the next generation as it is for the current,” Loy says.

Loy advises that the best thing producers can do is look 10 and 15 years down the road and consider a long-range plan. While he says many producers are great at looking at current genetics and maintaining the quality of their operations, they



forget to look down the line at where the industry is going, instead of just where it is.

“For a herd manager or owner, planning for the future and preparing the next generation is absolutely necessary,” says David Baker, farm transition specialist for the Beginning Farmer Center. “For these families that own these cattle herds, they need to take time to plan the future with a successor in mind. So many haven’t thought about the ongoing process.”

Baker recommends that producers evaluate their markets and consider how to use ever-evolving
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technology to better market to consumers. Working with other industries, such as meat packers and small locker plants, to create a partner link to the public can also greatly improve the long-term success of a beef operation, in Baker’s opinion.

“You have to build your reputation of producing safe, quality food,” Baker said.

Keeping in-depth records is high on the sustainability priority list for Farney. She recommends producers look carefully at how individual animals are performing in the herd and include those animals that are under performing in the culling process.

Efficiency matters

“Keeping records is one of the things that you just have to have to be sustainable,” Farney says. “The most common mistake is not having an accurate depiction of individual cow performance. If you have one cow that consistently weans the lightest weight calf and she eats the same amount as the rest of your cows, she’s not very efficient. So if you don’t know individual cow performance, you’re not maximizing the efficiency of your operation.”

Efficiency is an essential piece in the sustainability puzzle. Producers should always be looking for ways to streamline their operations, according to Loy.

“Producers that survive are the ones that have a lower cost of production. You’ve always got to be trying to be more efficient and profitable, even in times like this when everyone is profiting,” Loy says.

“This industry is cyclical in nature, so those that manage in a sustainable and cost-effective way are positioning themselves so that when profits become narrow they are successful.”

Baker, who predominantly works with new farmers and ranchers, urges older producers, especially those without a successor, to reach out to young producers and vice versa. The Beginning Farmer Center has a program called AgLink, which helps match young people looking to start in the agriculture industry with an older producer that lacks a successor and serves as a platform for introduction.

“I like to work with other young people to help them get established,” Baker says. “A good strong community has to have a good base for the next generation to come back to and consider what they might need to help them get started.”

While there’s no set way of guaranteeing longevity, there are a multitude of things that producers can do to ensure that their ranch will stand the test of time.

“Sustainability is being able to stay in the business,” Farney says. “You have to be willing to try new things. Just being willing to try new management systems that aren’t considered the norm is the best way to stay in the cattle business.” **HW**

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