

9 Quick Tips for Your Beef Operation

A recap of the 2019 Range Beef Cow Symposium provides tips for daily ranch work.

by Kindra Gordon

As the parent of over-scheduled high school students, my kids are often looking for the “CliffsNotes” version to their school assignments. These handy study guides provide a neatly packaged summary of the main points of the 300-page literature book or the science concepts my daughters are supposed to absorb.

Similarly, in a time-pressed beef industry, producers often do not have enough hours in a day to attend conferences that take them away from daily ranch work. So, here are some of the “CliffsNotes” tips for cattle managers that I gleaned from the 2019 Range Beef Cow Symposium hosted in mid-November in Mitchell, Neb.

1 Review your colostrum protocols

Cattle producers know colostrum is a calf’s most important meal, but if you must supplement the calf for it to get colostrum, there are some important guidelines to follow. Foremost, the philosophy of “giving a little milk replacer to hold newborn calves over until they get up to nurse and get colostrum,” is a bad idea, according to Brian Vander Ley, who is a veterinary epidemiologist with the University of Nebraska’s Great Plains Veterinary Education Center in Clay Center, Neb.

Why? Vander Ley explains as soon as newborn calves get that first meal in their stomach — even if it is just a small one — their gut wall begins to close and they lose the capacity to absorb the essential antibodies in colostrum necessary for immunity.

Thus, to optimize antibody absorption and immunity for the newborn calves, Vander Ley recommends, “Give as much as you can immediately.” If the supplemental colostrum is coming from the cow, which is preferred, milk out as much as you can to feed to the calf. If it is a purchased supplement, Vander Ley says a full dose should provide the equivalent of 100 to 120 grams of antibody to the calf. This is typically two packages, he underscores.

If colostrum is not available from the cow, Vander Ley advises using a colostrum replacer instead of a colostrum supplement, which he calls expensive and less effective. He notes the colostrum replacer product label should say it contains “dried colostrum.” Also, bottle feeding is preferred to feeding the calf with a stomach tube because the suckling process fosters the rumen to close. Suckling allows the colostrum liquid to then bypass the rumen and go straight to the intestines for absorption, whereas tubing a calf tends to deposit the liquid into the rumen.

2 Manage cow BCS to be 5 or 6 prior to calving

A body condition score (BCS) of 5 or 6 results in fewer newborn calf issues, according to Vander Ley. “Cows give birth more quickly, they produce better colostrum, the calf gets up

quicker and receives better antibody protection,” he says, adding, “Below a body condition score of 5 and bad things start to happen.” He cites research from 2014 indicating cows with a BCS less than 5 were two times more likely to have difficulty calving.

3 Utilize forage testing

North Dakota State University Area Livestock Extension Specialist Janna Block believes forage testing is “worth it every year,” and especially in years with the variable — and wet — growing conditions of 2019. Plain and simple she says forage quality is difficult to discern without an analysis. As you incorporate forage analysis into your operation, she advises selecting a forage testing lab and building a relationship. She says, “Call and have a conversation with them to answer your questions and make sure they can give you an interpretation of results.” Consult the National Forage Testing Association website, ForageTesting.org, to find a list of certified labs.

Block is also a proponent of you having your own hay probe, which costs about \$150. “I want people to start sampling and send their forage to a lab. Very few producers are using this, but it helps match feeding the forage at the right time and can minimize the need to feed other supplements,” she says.

4 Employ the Cow-Q-Lator

Available from the University of Nebraska, several Excel worksheets can be found at Extension.unl.edu to assist in determining breakevens and other costs. University of Nebraska’s Beef Extension Educator Aaron Berger advocates using the Cow-Calf Share Lease Cow-Q-Lator to help determine what is fair between both parties involved in lease agreements. He explains this worksheet tool allows both parties to put in what they are contributing, including things you do not write a check for such as the value of labor, depreciation and opportunity cost. Along with this online tool, Berger underscores trust and integrity are paramount for lease agreements to work and says, “Long-term, these agreements need to be a win-win for both parties in order to be successful.”

He suggests topics to discuss with partnership agreements include lender involvement, cattle care and body condition goals, sickness and death loss, breeding decisions, breeds used, culling decisions, replacements, division of and branding of calves with shares, hauling and marketing, expected results, and an exit plan.

Additionally, Berger notes a third-party mediator may be helpful, and he advises putting agreements in writing to ensure clarity. He also suggests keeping heifer-development agreements separate from cow-lease agreements.



5 Use these two online range management tools

University of Nebraska's Mitchell Stephenson, range and forage management specialist, is also a proponent of two new technology tools to assist with range management. They are Grass-Cast and the Rangeland Analysis Platform.

Similar to a weather forecast, *GrassCast.agsci.colostate.edu* offers a free, grassland production forecast at the county level throughout the growing season. To create this forecast, the computer model incorporates observed and forecasted weather for a specific region along with data on evapotranspiration, a vegetation index based on land greenness data collected from satellite imagery, and historical weather and grassland production information. Beginning in May, Grass-Cast predictions are updated every two weeks through the growing season.

Stephenson explains, "This provides near real-time data analysis of how current weather variables are likely to influence forage production later in the growing season." Grass-Cast offers a way to predict biomass production earlier in the growing season, which is beneficial to plan stocking rates, grazing rotations and especially early detection of drought, he notes.

Also available as a free precision land management app is the *Rangelands.app*, used to monitor rangeland vegetation trends. This technology correlates decades of Landsat satellite imagery with on-the-ground vegetation measurements to create maps showing plant cover at a pasture, watershed or regional/county scale. Specifically, the maps are generated at 30-meter pixels to show percent cover of annuals, perennials, trees or bare ground.

Stephenson calls this an "excellent tool" to monitor ground cover, which is a key indicator of rangeland health. It can also be useful to monitor areas where cedar tree or other invasive species encroachment is a concern.

6 Think differently

Western Nebraska rancher Vern Terrell shared several strategies his family uses to keep their production costs low and their profit margins favorable. Among those strategies is they operate primarily on leased land in order to lower their property tax burden. They also focus on buying older, less expensive cows to keep herd numbers – and calf production – up.

7 Manage marketing emotions

Hayes, South Dakota, cattleman Wacey Kirkpatrick shared stories of running yearlings the past several years – and the lesson he learned from a \$40,000 margin call. He says, "We let our emotions get to us and listened to the market hype." Now the advice he follows is "have a plan, know your numbers, and stick to your plan." Kirkpatrick says he now keeps a copy of the "Wall Street Cheat Sheet's Psychology of a Market Cycle" posted on his office wall to help give him a 10,000-foot perspective of the emotions during the changing market when making management decisions.

8 Give with warm hands

Citing a biblical reference from Proverbs, Bethany Johnston with the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition encouraged producers to prepare for ranch transitions while their health and abilities still allow them to make the transition. Acknowledging ranch transition planning can be an overwhelming task, Johnston advises thinking of it as a marathon that you take "one step at a time." She also emphasizes future planning is not only about determining what you want to happen to your ranch; it is also about protecting the ranch from events you do not want to happen, like estate tax debt, a family division or a forced sale to pay hospital or nursing home costs. To assist the transition process, Johnston suggests producers utilize a workbook created by University of Nebraska Extension which includes step-by-step questions to guide the estate planning process, as well as a script for initiating conversations with family members. Access the workbook at NebraskaGrazingLands.org.

9 Support each other

Greg Ibach, a Nebraska native and current United States Department of Agriculture undersecretary of agriculture for marketing and regulatory programs, shared a personal story he relates to the beef industry. He says as the proud father of triplets, who are now in their late 20s, he and his wife realized early on that all three of their children could not be the class valedictorian or the champion beef showman at the same time. "So, my wife's philosophy was that we all needed to work together and when one of us did well, we all did well as a family."

Ibach proposed this story translates to ag and the beef industry and a message of working together. He says, "We have segments within the beef industry from cow-calf and feeder to packer and others in between. It's easy to pit one against the other. But we need to think about if one of us wins in the beef industry, it's a win for all of us in the beef industry." **HW**