### Livestock & Crops Calendar of Events

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Managing in Dynamic Times

Doug Mayo, Jackson County Livestock Extension Agent

Every small business owner in America is struggling in this recession, and agricultural producers are no exception. Beef cattle producers, like every other business will have to spend some time considering how to better manage their operations in order to survive until beef prices improve.

One of the first things a producer should develop is a true understanding of where your money goes, and where to focus your attention. For instance, it does not make much sense to cut out vaccines and wormer, when they represent such a small part of your overall budget, but could have major, lasting impact on the health and productivity of your herd. Dr. Curt Lacy provided this graphic at the annual Beef Conference that shows a comparison of expenses for a typical beef herd.

These figures may not be the same for every operation, but the point is that 2/3 of the carrying cost for a cow comes from nutrition, either as pasture, hay or purchased feeds. These are the areas where cost cutting efforts will have the greatest impacts to your bottom line.

It is time to get back to the basics, and find practical ways to reduce expenses, or increase income to stay in business. As your Agent I have picked the brains of greatest beef and forage specialist’s minds in the southeast and have come up with 10 ideas that may improve the efficiency of your ranch.

1) Record Analysis:
Record keeping has never been something cattlemen enjoy, but it becomes even more essential when profitability is so elusive. Records are not very valuable if they are only used to calculate income taxes. The real power of records comes from detailed analysis and comparison. Individual cow data is best, but even whole herd performance along with cash expenses and income are powerful tools to use to evaluate the operation. If you need help with records, contact me. I have developed a fairly simple record system you keep in a notebook in your truck or office. Certainly computer programs are the most powerful, but not everyone has the ability or desire to enter all of the needed information into a computer on a regular basis.

2) Reduce Stocking rate:
Some economists estimate annual carrying costs for beef cows are as high as $450-$500 per head. The simplest way to reduce expenses is to manage fewer cows on the same acreage. Bear in mind that income will also be reduced and fixed costs per cow
actually increase, but total expenses will decline with fewer cows. Start with the obvious. If she does not have a live calf to sell this year, she is costing you money. Then sell the cattle that are the least productive, older cows, and poorer producers. With fewer head on the same acreage, your pasture should provide more nutrition for each cow. If you are currently losing money, than fewer head is a quick fix.

3) Controlled Breeding Season
The single greatest practice for managing the productivity of a cattle herd for optimal performance is having a defined breeding season of 90 days or less. If every cow in the herd calves in three months, management becomes, so much simpler. It is much easier to tag individual calves and keep records. All cattle can receive vaccinations at the same time. Supplemental feeding can be targeted to get cattle in ideal condition prior to calving. Only the most productive and fertile cattle will remain in the herd, so future replacements will only be kept from fertile cattle that breed early in the season.

4) Pregnancy Test/ Bull Evaluation
Cattle in a defined breeding season can be pregnancy tested two months after the bulls come out of the herd. Instead of waiting for the calving season to end, open cows can be sold right away. Bulls also should be tested ahead of the breeding season to ensure fertility. Infertile and subfertile bulls should be sold, and highly fertile bulls purchased to ensure the herd is productive. Fertility is the most important factor that affects the profitability of a cow herd. Pregnancy testing cows and semen testing bulls are key practices ranchers can use to manage fertility.

5) Supplement Efficiency
If fertility is the number one objective, nutrition is a close second. Nutrition has the greatest effect on cattle fertility. In order to keep cattle productive and calving on an annual basis, cows must be in good condition at calving. Once cows have calved, it is very expensive to get them back in good condition. All cattle will lose weight after calving, so it is very important to make sure they are in ideal condition. One simple method to use supplemental feeds efficiently is to sort thin cattle off at weaning, keep them separate from the rest of the herd, and feed them a little extra until their back in good flesh. After weaning, the nutrient requirements of bred cows drop significantly, so this is most efficient time to get them back in good condition. Based on these principals, you get more bang for your feed dollars feeding cattle in late summer and early fall prior to calving, than after calving. Hay alone is not adequate for cows with calves, so some supplement will be required, but if cattle are in good shape before calving, then only maintenance levels are needed.

6) Optimal Fertilization
The days of fertilizing everything for maximum production are gone. First and foremost, fertilize based on soil tests. The most efficient money you may spend on your pasture may be in the form of lime. If your pH is low, those high priced nutrients you are buying in your fertilizer are less available to the plant. Also it is no longer just Nitrogen fertilizer that has run the cost of fertilizer up. With a soil test you only add the phosphorous and potassium the forage needs. Finally, beware of commercial lab recommendations. The soil analysis is accurate, but as a rule their recommendations are higher than what IFAS research has shown is needed for optimal performance. Extra fertilizer can increase yields but university recommendations are based on optimal or best bang for your buck yields. Only fertilize actively growing grass. The best return on investment for hay field fertilization last year was in July, due to dry conditions in the spring.

7) Hay Efficiency
The second largest expense for most ranchers is hay for the winter. Research has shown that as much as 40% dry matter losses occur each year due to the way hay is stored. Below are dry matter losses
measured for five different storage practices on ryegrass hay from May through August for a demonstration at the NFREC Beef Unit in 2002. Barns are by far the best for hay storage. The greatest improvement for outside storage came from simply getting bales off the ground, so rain and moisture did not collect on the bottom.

**Dry Matter Losses of Ryegrass Hay in 90 days**

![Bar chart showing dry matter losses for different storage methods.]

In addition to protecting dry matter losses, the tarp and palette combination also provided the best prevention of energy losses.

**TDN Losses of Ryegrass Hay over 90 days**

![Bar chart showing TDN losses for different storage methods.]

Just by changing how hay is stored, you could actually get by with 20% fewer bales of hay, with some investment in tarps and some form of drainage under the bales. Plus the quality of the hay will be protected, so cattle will eat more of each bale. With the ever increasing costs for hay, investment in storage could pay for itself in just a few years.

8) **Rotational Grazing:**
Since pasture costs represent over 1/3 of cow expenses, we need to get as much from our pastures as possible. Generally, the more frequently cattle are moved, and the longer a pasture rests the more productive they are. Forage productivity can be increased at least 20% simply by having 4 or more pastures the herd rotates through on a regular basis. This allows the grass to rest and maintain a healthier root system, and also prevents the grass from getting over stressed. The rule of thumb with grazing is “take half and leave half”. This ensures the plant will not prune its roots and will recover from grazing very quickly. If cows stay in the same pasture, or all of the gates are left open, the cows will start grazing the tenderest shoots and leave the more mature grass alone. That is why you see holes or weeds in the pasture, because over grazing kills out spots over time.

9) **Inexpensive Weed Control**
Weeds rob nutrients and water from productive forages. Spray weeds early when they are less than 8” high, and less expensive herbicides such as 2,4-D and Weedmaster are very effective. If weed control is skipped for a year or two, weeds begin to take hold and produce seeds that will germinate for years. Cattle will also begin to avoid grazing weedy areas, and overgraze others. If fertilizer and weed control are both eliminated, weeds are at an even greater advantage and the productive pasture that has been nurtured for years begins to decline.

10) **Eliminate Luxuries**
Anything that makes work easy or fun may be costing you money. Ask the tough question, is it more efficient or just easier. Lick blocks are very easy to use for protein supplementation, but they are also the most expensive source. Commodity feeds are the cheapest but require more labor. You can’t feed commodity feeds once or twice per week, but the extra trouble will pay off because you have the greatest ability to control nutrition and expenses with daily or alternating day feeding of commodity feeds. Also evaluate your equipment payments. It may be nice to have three tractors, but two may do the job. Fancy new trucks, offroad golf carts, pleasure horses, hunting buggies, or other toys could be sold to keep the operation out of the red. I know I am meddling now, but the point is to really stop and consider every phase of your operation to ensure that you are making the most out of every dollar invested in your ranch.
Agriculture commodity pricing has been on a rollercoaster for the last two years. Crop prices have achieved record high levels and acreage has soared. To counter the increased demand, fertilizer prices have doubled at least twice along with fuel prices. Not a big deal when growing $5 per bushel, but this dramatically impacts the cattle producer since beef prices have hardly moved. So how can we manage pastures to maximize productivity while minimizing cost?

Essentially, we have five options:
1. Spray herbicides
2. Fertilize
3. Spray and fertilize
4. Mow
5. Do nothing

Let’s examine the cost benefit of each of these options. The chart (figure 1) shows that spraying 2,4-D (1 qt/A) or applying 34 lb of nitrogen will increase grass yield by 230 to 350 pounds per acre. Applying nitrogen and herbicide together more than doubles grass production. However, if fertilizing and spraying is too expensive, which should we chose? Depending on what source of fertilizer is used, 34 lb of nitrogen can cost between $20 and $40/A. On the other hand, a herbicide plus application cost will run between $8 and $25/A, depending on which herbicide and application rate is used. Considering that either of these will improve grass yield, a herbicide application is likely to be the most cost effective.

Obviously we know that pastures will need fertilizer and lime to continue productive growth. So when do we do it? Weed control in pastures will generally not be required every year. So, clean up the weeds in year 1 and plan to start on a fertility program in years 2 and 3. This process will increase the competitiveness of the grass and, in turn, suppress weed growth. A healthy pasture is the best form of weed control. But we must remove the weeds present before this process can occur.

Mowing is another technique commonly used by pasture managers. Depending on equipment size and driver skill, mowing can cost between $8 and $15/A. Is this money well spent? Figure 2 indicates that mowing will generally not result in improved grass production. This is because mowing rarely kills weeds, but rather just sets them back and delays their regrowth. Therefore, mowing can cost almost as much as a herbicide application, but may not provide any weed control or improved grass production. With mowing it is important to remember that fuel no longer cost $0.75/gal. At one time mowing was very inexpensive and any benefit from it was gain. But, we simply don’t have the luxury of performing cheap mowing anymore.

Lastly, we can always choose to do nothing and let the grass and weeds compete. Like all ventures, low investment generally provides low return. This method can be profitable for producers that use very low stocking rates. But, normal herds will be hurt by this process and weight gain will be slow and body condition will suffer. With marginal

Figure 1 shows the Influence of herbicide (1 qt/A 2,4-D), nitrogen (34 lb/A of N), and herbicide plus nitrogen fertility on grass growth on a field infested with ragweed.
investments, the amount of additional weight gain the animals will achieve can easily pay for itself.

We are all aware that the best way to maximize grass production and cattle performance is to manage our pastures with proper fertility, mowing, and herbicide applications. But, if performing all these simultaneously is not affordable, we must choose a strategy to maximize our resources. It is likely that herbicide use is the most cost effective way to initially improve grass production. After weeds are controlled, a good fertility program will be needed.

Lastly, large scale mowing will generally cost more than it returns. It may be necessary to limit mowing and reinvest the savings in other areas.

Upcoming Programs & Events

Beef Cattle Marketing School April 16

The Southeastern Beef Cattle Marketing School will be held in Marianna on April 16, at the Jackson County Extension Conference Center. The school was designed to help cattle producers better understand cattle markets, factors that influence prices, and ultimately improve the value of the calves they sell at their local livestock markets. Topics for the school will include:

- Market outlook for 2009 and beyond
- The best and worst best times of the year to sell
- Techniques to estimate cattle prices in advance
- Factors that affect prices for individual calves
- Things to consider to avoid price discounts
- Methods to increase the total value of cattle sold
- Marketing opportunities available through your local livestock market

This seminar is a cooperative effort of Specialists and County Agents in Florida, Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina. The schedule for the Marketing Schools begins with registration at 8:30 AM, includes lunch, and will end around 3:30 PM. Registration for the Schools is only $10 per person, payable at the door. In order to ensure adequate food and materials, please RSVP with the Jackson County Extension Office at 850-482-9620 by Friday, April 10. To download the complete agenda, go to http://jackson.ifas.ufl.edu.

Farm Bureau DOT Regulation for Ag Producers Seminar May 5

Jackson County Farm Bureau and Jackson County Extension are hosting an “Information Sharing Meeting” to discuss current regulations for the hauling of classified hazardous materials such as pesticides, diesel fuel and fertilizer to farms and farm equipment, along with other statutes involving agriculture. The Seminar will be held Tuesday night, May 5, 2009 at the Jackson County Extension Conference Center, 2741 Pennsylvania Avenue, Marianna. It will begin with a dinner being served at 6:00 pm. RSVP’s are required by May 1, 2009. Please call the Jackson County Extension office at 850-482-9620.

The Florida Department of Transportation will have several officers on hand to explain the newly adopted rules and laws, and to hear concerns of local producers. This will be an excellent time to find out how to be in compliance with current laws and regulations and also to bring up issues that need to be changed or addressed. Officers are enforcing
the statutes that they are given. You need to be in compliance or face fines.

Your input on issues that affect your operation is vital to the process of getting these regulations modified. Last year the issue of over-wide equipment was addressed, due to the efforts of Farm Bureau members and leadership.

**Cow/Calf BMP Kickoff Seminar May 14**

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, in cooperation with the Florida Cattlemen’s Association, and the University of Florida-IFAS, have scheduled a kickoff videoconference to formally introduce the recently adopted Cow/Calf Best Management Practices (BMP) manual on May 14. This will be the official launch of the industry’s BMP program.

The meeting will provide producers with key information on the use of the manual, enrollment process, soil testing, and forage production as it relates to water quality protection. This is a very important program, given the vast number of acres of rangeland in Florida. Producers are encouraged to make every effort to attend. The seminar will be held from 5:30 p.m. until 7:00 p.m. at the Jackson County Extension Conference Center, 2741 Pennsylvania Avenue, Marianna. Call 850-482-9620 for more information.

**Beef Cattle Short Course April 29-May 1**

The 58th annual beef Cattle Short Course will be held April 29 through May 1 at the Hilton University of Florida Conference Center in Gainesville, Florida. This year the Short Course will focus on Cash, Cows and Calves. Early registration of $125 ends April 17, with regular registration of $165 after April 17. For more information:

http://www.animal.ufl.edu/extension/beef/short.shtml

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**From the Bull Pen**

**Support a Family**

The prospective Father-in-law asked, “Young man, can you support a family?”

The surprised Groom-to-be replied, “Well, no. I was just planning to support your daughter. The rest of you will have to fend for yourselves.”

**Baptist Cowboy**

A cowboy, who is visiting Wyoming from Texas, walks into a bar and orders three mugs of beer. He sits in the back of the room, drinking a sip out of each one in turn. When he finishes them, he comes back to the bar and orders three more. The bartender approaches and tells the cowboy, “You know, a mug goes flat after I draw it. It would taste better if you bought one at a time.” The cowboy replies, “Well, you see, I have two brothers. One is in Arizona, the other is in Colorado. When we all left our home in Texas, we promised that we'd drink this way to remember the days when we drank together. So I'm drinking one beer for each of my brothers and one for myself.” The bartender admits that this is a nice custom, and leaves it there.

The cowboy becomes a regular in the bar, and always drinks the same way. He orders three mugs and drinks them in turn. One day, he comes in and only orders two mugs. All the regulars take notice and fall silent. When he comes back to the bar for the second round, the bartender says, "I don't want to intrude on your grief, but I wanted to offer my condolences on your loss." The cowboy looks quite puzzled for a moment, then a light dawns in his eyes and he laughs. "Oh, no, everybody's just fine," he explains, "It's just that my wife and I joined the Baptist Church and I had to quit drinking." "Hasn't affected my brothers though."

Truly Yours,

Doug Mayo
Interim County Extension Director
2009 Southeast Beef Cattle Marketing School

RSVP with host site by Thursday, April 9 to ensure adequate materials and food are available. $10 Registration fee payable at the door.

Arcadia – Tuesday, April 14 – DeSoto Co. Extension – 863-993-4846
Ocala – Wednesday, April 15 – Marion Co. Extension – 352-671-8400
Marianna – Thursday, April 16 – Jackson Co. Extension – 850-482-9620

Schedule of Events:
8:30 AM  Registration
9:00   Welcome and overview
9:15   Cattle market outlook for 2009  Walt Prevatt, Auburn Livestock Economist
10:15  Developing a marketing plan  Todd Davis, Clemson Agricultural Economist
10:45  Break
11:00  Seasonality of cattle prices  Curt Lacy, Georgia Agricultural Economist
11:30  Using futures to predict cash prices  Walt Prevatt, Auburn Livestock Economist
12:15  Lunch  Included with registration
1:00   Price factors, USDA grades and market news reports  Terry Harris, USDA Market News Service
2:00   Break
2:15   Adding value to the cattle you sell  Doug Mayo, Jackson Co. Extension
2:45   Marketing opportunities at your local livestock market  Local Livestock Market Managers
3:15   Program evaluation
3:30   Adjourn