



Innovation, education and regenerative agriculture

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# November 2023

# Director's Note — Tanis Cross

### Howdy folks,

I hope this letter finds you all healthy and happy. We hope to see you at the FFGA Christmas party on November 17th in High River. Register at: <a href="https://www.foothillsforage.com/christmasparty">https://www.foothillsforage.com/christmasparty</a>

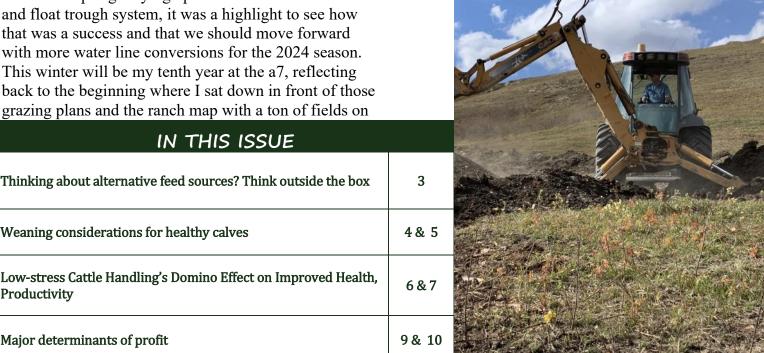
I am sure grateful to be a part of this community, you guys are so great to learn from, share experiences with and join together to improve and succeed in each of our operations.

Highlights for us at the a7 Ranche in 2023 included being able to receive a large number of grass yearlings in early spring. We had some great horseman and stockman teach us with dogs, horses and on foot. These guys settled our herds and managed herd health so nice; I learned a lot. We did have to ship out a lot earlier than usual with springs drying up. With our water reservoirs and float trough system, it was a highlight to see how that was a success and that we should move forward with more water line conversions for the 2024 season. This winter will be my tenth year at the a7, reflecting back to the beginning where I sat down in front of those grazing plans and the ranch map with a ton of fields on

it, I thought to myself, why all the details, math and small field sizes? Up until a couple of years ago, we used to get pretty regular rain falls so grazing was easy and low stress. I now see the benefit to grass management and if it is done well, it can be resilient even in the conditions the last couple of years have shown us.

I am proud of the forage industry and the great work everyone is doing, no matter to the conditions. Nature is a constant change or surprise, however you want to word it, thankful for southern Alberta's many seasons. This is not always easy but, there are good times ahead.

(John Cross-back hoe work for water development Photo: Tanis Cross)



# FFGA Christmas Party

November 17, 2023 Heritage Inn, High River

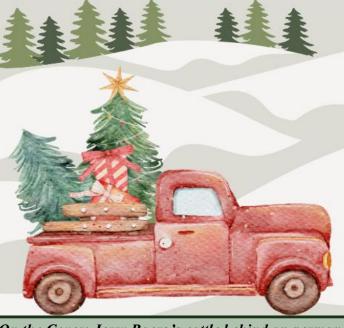
- 5:00 Cocktails
- 6:00 Dinner
- **Entertainment by Cowboy Poet B.J Smith** to follow

Please register before November 10 for free at:

https://www.foothillsforage.com/christmasparty

(Must be an FFGA Member to attend)







On the Cover: Jerry Baerg's cattle behind an permanent electric fence that was funded through RALP. Photo: FFGA

### Thank you for your support!





















## Thinking about alternative feed sources? Think outside the box



After facing a third year of drought across much of Alberta, producers are getting creative in the search for alternative feed options. Here are some ideas to help beef cattle survive – if not thrive – through another difficult year.

Continuing dry weather is translating into a tight feed supply again this fall. By mid-August, some producers were already feeding cows, three to four months earlier than in a good year. Lynne Girardin, ruminant nutritionist with BeefSmart, suggests using creativity and ingenuity to source alternative feed.

"If you can bale it or put a fence around it, we can test it to make sure there are no toxins and the nutrients aren't out of whack for the class of cattle, and they can feed on it. We've been feeding almost everything under the sun," she says.

### Think through all options

A quick list of feed options includes: cereals, including wheat, barley, and oats; legumes, both peas and lentils; and brassicas, including canola regrowth (if sulfur levels are acceptable). Creative producers are also having success feeding animals hailed-out or failed annual cash crops, crop stubble and weeds such as kochia.

Girardin says, "Cattle are amazing at taking lower quality feed and turning it into energy and protein, and not just surviving on it but thriving."

Another option is fencing new areas for pasture. "I'm testing slough bottoms and marsh areas, and new fences are getting put around areas that have never been grazed before. We first walk through new pastures and see what's in there to make sure nothing will hurt grazing animals. As long as we know what we're dealing with in terms of nutrient composition and toxins, we can feed almost anything," Girardin says.

### Ask around

Checking in with other farmers and

food producers may pay off, especially if you have contacts who farm in areas that received more rain this year. "They may have more feed available than they need, or in some cases producers sold their own cows but still have pasture available," Girardin says.

Of course, there's a nutrient-cycling benefit for landowners who allow cattle to graze their land, Girardin points out. "Any manure and urine left behind while the cattle are out there is like free fertilizer, so that's a good concept to sell to your neighbours."

#### **Test first**

The preliminary step in using alternative feed sources or pastures is to test for toxins, such as ergot, fusarium, DON, and particularly nitrates, which can be high in drought-stressed feeds. "Nitrates can be present at any growth stage, so that's an important one to watch out for. Another common toxin is oxalate in weeds, and it's important to test for, because it can be very toxic to cattle," says Girardin.

When cattle are feeding in new areas, be sure to test water sources and slough bottoms. "Green algae problems generally occur a lot earlier in the year in water sources, but anytime we have a change in temperature or lengthy period of drought, well water properties and nutrients can change. The key is to test everything the animals might be eating or drinking so you know what you're dealing with," Girardin says.

### Get help to do-it-yourself

Nutritionists are available to help with testing, but aren't essential. "In a drought period, producers are already stressed for cash, so they may prefer to do all the necessary testing on their own to avoid extra costs," says Girardin.

To do it yourself, start with good information. The Beef Cattle Research Council (BCRC) website offers great feed testing information as a starting point, and a ruminant nutritionist or feed company salesperson may be able to answer questions.

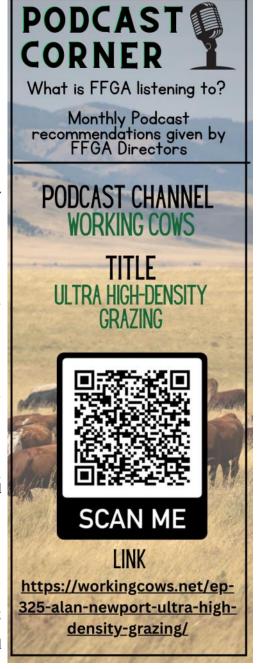
The key, suggests Girardin, is to start by testing a representative sample. "Ensure your tests will give you the results you need to make a good decision in the first place, so you don't end up having to make a difficult decision later."

Considering the many alternative feed sources available is wise even in good years, because it extends

grazing time, Girardin says. "It allows producers to reserve their best feed supply for when it's most needed, and it has kept many from having to sell the herd. There are multiple options available; we just have to think outside the box."

Author: Robin Galey

Original Article: <a href="https://abpdaily.com/">https://abpdaily.com/</a>
<a href="issues-insights-influence/thinking-about-alternative-feed-sources-think-outside-the-box/">https://abpdaily.com/</a>
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# Weaning considerations for healthy calves



Whether calves will be retained and backgrounded or sold shortly after weaning, it is important to consider the impacts of weaning strategies on calf health and performance, says Janna Block, North Dakota State University Extension livestock systems specialist at the Hettinger Research Extension Center.

Many producers wean calves at the same time every year but factors that should be considered include cow body condition, feed resources and the timeline for feeding and marketing the calf crop.

If cows are in poor body condition and forage conditions are poor, reducing nutritional demands from lactation producers may need to provide goodis one of the best ways to improve cow condition and prepare for the next calving, says Block. Since nursing calves also consume forage at two to 2.5 per cent of body weight, weaning can also reduce forage demands and allow producers to extend the grazing season.

Besides birth, weaning is one of the most stressful periods in a calf's life. Multiple stressors occurring at once can multiply the negative effects. Types of stress include removal from the dam and commingling with herd mates, processing (weighing and vaccinations), changes in feed and a new pen or pasture environment.

Increased levels of cortisol in the blood due to stress can lower immune function, increase susceptibility to disease and reduce weight gains. Taking steps to minimize stress during

this period will optimize health and performance of weaned calves.

### Weaning strategies

Traditionally, calves are weaned by abrupt separation from the dam. While this method is commonly utilized due to reduced inputs, it results in maximum stress and bawling calves. Some research indicates that calves may walk 15 to 20 kilometres daily and eat less feed when weaned through this method. In addition, a higher percentage of abruptly weaned calves may require treatment for respiratory diseases.

Two-step weaning strategies do not allow suckling but allow the calf to maintain contact with the dam before separation. This method can be implemented using fenceline weaning or anti-suckling devices such as nose flaps.

If considering fenceline weaning, move the cows to an adjacent dry lot or pasture and allow the calves to remain in a familiar environment. This strategy requires secure fences. If forage quality or quantity is a concern, quality grass hay to calves to reduce weight loss during the weaning period. Once calves are weaned and eating forage, they can be moved to a dry lot or fed on pasture, depending on feed resources.

"Utilizing nose flaps requires additional handling, but reduced stress and better performance may be worth it," says Block.

"Calves can be fitted with nose flaps, vaccinated and turned back out with cows for another four to five days. If left on longer, there is increased irritation in the nose, more lost nose flaps and an increased incidence of 'cheaters' who have learned to nurse around them. To remove the flaps, calves must be run through a chute a second time. These devices can be washed and reused in most cases."

### Health management

If cow-calf pairs were split across multiple pastures this summer and fall, producers should consider weaning by pasture group with no commingling for at least 45 days after weaning. Even if all calves were born and raised on the same ranch, cattle in various groups have likely developed a different social structure and may have been exposed to different organisms or health challenges. Commingling all pasture groups at the same time into a common weaning pen or pasture can lead to increased respiratory disease post-weaning.

If possible, bring all cows and calves together in a common pasture several weeks before weaning to allow them to acclimate.

Other potential risk factors may influence health at this time. Lack of passive immunity, temperature fluctuations, heat stress, nutritional stress prior to weaning, dusty pens and handling stress may negatively impact the healthy transition to weaning.

Weaned calves are at high risk for parasite infestations, which can impact immune function and reduce feed intake. Calves should be dewormed when they receive their first round of shots if possible.

Although vaccine protocols vary, calves should be vaccinated against clostridial and bovine respiratory disease pathogens. Consult the herd veterinarian to develop vaccine protocols.

### Facilities and stockmanship

Pre-check all facilities such as gates, chutes, alleys and crowd tubs before weaning to ensure everything is in good working order. Make sure surfaces are non-slip and eliminate packed snow or ice to avoid falls. Try to avoid weaning if there is a big cold front coming and reschedule if necessary.

Maintaining vaccines at the re-

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quired temperatures can be challenging in the cold. Freezing will inactivate modified live vaccines and can create compounds that increase stress. Use a well-insulated cooler and store vaccine guns appropriately when not in use.

"The importance of animal handling during weaning shouldn't be underestimated," says Block. "Excitement caused by loud and aggressive interactions with humans will add stress and could reduce immune function. Aggressive cattle handling will also slow the rate at which calves adapt to new feed and water resources, and could influence temperament throughout the feeding period.

"This will increase flightiness, decrease time spent at the feed bunk and cause an overall decrease in weight gain, feed efficiency and cost of gain. It is a good practice to have the same person carefully walk pens with newly weaned calves to familiarize them with their new environment."

### Feeding management

Proper nutritional management of weaned calves is critical in ensuring optimal health and performance. For the first few days, calves should be provided with high-quality, long-stem grass hay, similar to what they may have consumed on pasture with their dams.

If calves have been consuming creep feed, it should be made available in the weaning pen. Putting familiar feed in bunks is a good way to

train calves to eat. Place bunks or self -feeders perpendicular to the fence line so that calves will bump into their feed. Some producers use a palatable molasses-based mineral lick tub to get livestock/weaning-considerations-foradditional nutrients into the calves and stimulate salivation, which in-

creases feed and water intake.

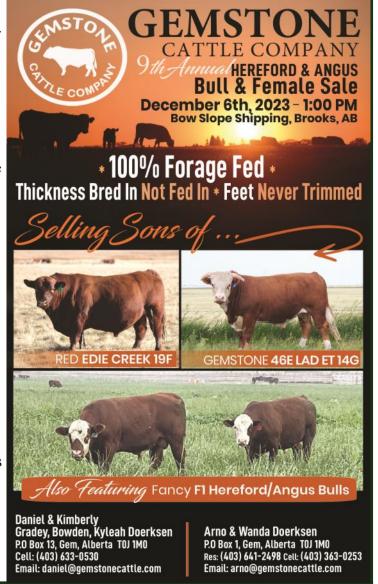
Clean and accessible water is crucial during the weaning period. Ideally, at least 10 per cent of cattle in the pen should be able to drink at one time. Water tanks should be checked daily and kept clean to avoid algae growth or contamination from feed and manure.

Additional water tanks in the weaning pen along the fence line might be useful until calves have adapted to their new water sources.

There are many different weaning strategies that can reduce stress and adequately prepare calves to make a smooth transition.

Author: North Dakota State University

Original Article: <a href="https://">https://</a> www.manitobacooperator.ca/ healthy-calves/



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# Low-stress Cattle Handling's Domino Effect on Improved Health, Productivity



"Low stress handling presents a domino effect. By minimizing handling stress, you will see improvements in immune response, eating and producing. Calves go back to eating and gaining weight. Cows go back to eating and growing their calf. And, cattle respond better to vaccines," says Julia Herman, beef cattle ply technical services veterinarian specialist veterinarian with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA).

### **Defining Low-stress Handling**

For anyone unfamiliar with the term and practice, "Low-stress handling is one part of stockmanship that incorporates the understanding of cattle's natural behaviors and the handler using that knowledge to positively affect cattle movement and management. It's responding to their movement, anticipating what the animal will do next," says Dr. Herman. The Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program teaches about this principle in preventing stress and disease in cattle, which improves cattle welfare and productivity.

While the practice of excellent stockmanship may have been brought more to the forefront in recent years, the skills are something that have, often, been passed down through generations of family ranch-

Dr. Herman remembers watching her husband and his dad work cattle years ago. "It was like magic," she said. "They could sort cattle without

making a sound. I think there are families where this level of stockmanship has been passed down from generation to generation, and it's taken a couple of high-profile people, like Temple Grandin and Bud Williams, to really bring low-stress handling and stockmanship to the forefront. They have been really good champions of that type of handling."

### The Benefits of Practicing It

When we are stressed, we're more likely to succumb to a cold or change in behavior. The same rings true for cattle – they can experience health implications and even become moody – and the impacts can stem generations.

Tony Hawkins, Valley Vet Supshared how, "Anything we could do to minimize stress in these animals is good – one, because of animal husbandry and two, because it will actually improve their response to vaccines. Low-stress handling is good for you, and it's good for them."

Long thought to be true, science has confirmed how cattle handling directly affects cattle behavior, in addition to health.

Interestingly, low-stress handling methods impact mothering behavior of today, plus the growth and behavior of her future offspring. Dr. Herman explained more, saying "We're learning more about mothering behavior and how minimizing stress, such as practicing low-stress handling with the dam, in addition to her genetics, can impact multiple generations of animals. That's because stress hormones circulate throughout the blood system. If you're following good stockmanship, the heifer will have a better attitude and be calmer in stressful situations, and that can follow down lines. Good-behavior cows can pass that behavior on to

multiple generations. I think people have known that, but we're finally getting scientific proof of that."

### 3 Tips to Implement When Working Cattle

- 1. Take advantage of their flight zones to move cattle. Picture an imaginary oval around a single animal; your placement encourages them to start or stop movement. Dr. Herman explained more, saying, "When you enter the animal's (or group's) flight zone, it encourages forward movement. When you retreat from the flight zone, it signals the animal to stop moving. These concepts can be used whether you are handling cattle on foot, horseback, in a vehicle, or when the cattle are in a chute. If we provide good directions to handlers and the cattle through lowstress handling, we improve how the animals respond during handling events."
- 2. When working cattle and you see a hiccup, it's OK to pause, take a minute and investigate. If you notice cattle are no longer moving smoothly through a specific part of the facility, pause and investigate the hold-up. Dr. Hawkins stressed that, "Really importantly, producers need to think about the design of their facility, and overall quality of the facility, because that plays a big role in how these animals move."
- 3. Prioritize training, and have the right people for the right job. Dr. Herman says, "I think that a huge thing is making sure that our people are trained in the jobs that we are expecting them to do. Stockmanship training creates confidence in our caretakers and improves human safety around cattle. Also, it's important to be

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open to changing roles of people during processing events, so that they feel more comfortable and effective. Maybe someone is pushing cows but would rather when they get tired, maybe we need to switch people out every couple of hours." This will improve the human's experience which will also improve the

cattle's experience.

At the end of the day, Dr. Herman asks, "What can the producer control? They can control the products they're using, the facility they're running animals through, give vaccines, or vice versa. And and they can control how they are handling the animals going through it – all to set that cow or calf up for a positive experience and the most productive life possible."

Education, resources and training

are easily accessible for producers, to help further steward the industry we're all passionate about.

Author: Aimee Robinson Original Article: https:// www.bovinevetonline.com/news/ education/low-stress-cattlehandlings-domino-effect-improvedhealth-productivity





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# Major determinants of profit



In a previous article, I asked, Profitable Ranching — Is it Possible? I answered, "Yes, if you know how." In two recent articles, I presented the five essentials for successful ranch management, which I believe are the essential attitudes, approaches or mindset you need to be profitable:

- The approach must be both integrative and holistic.
- Strive for continuous improvement of the key resources land, live-stock and people.
- Acquire and use good planning and decision-making tools.
- Wage war on costs.
- Emphasize marketing.

Now I want to discuss major determinants of profit.

There may be a few other essentials for your unique operation — especially if you have livestock other than cattle. Having watched many ranchers operate (and as I operated early in my ranching career), I found most of us placed way too much emphasis on weaning weight. It often took our attention away from other leverage points that have a lot more potential for improving profit. Increases in weaning weight always come with a cost.

I won't say that, in some cases, the costs aren't justified. However, often they are not. The costs are not just the obvious increases in feed or supplementation. There is also a very significant cost when the weaning weight comes because you are running bigger cows that give more milk. Those bigger cows are usually less fertile than smaller cows weaning slightly smaller calves, and you could run more of the smaller ones on the same feed resource.

So, let's look at some "big hitters." **Enterprise mix and choices** 

How you choose to use your land and the profit centers that you put on it are extremely important. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each farm or ranch needs to make the best decision for its unique set of circumstances — ranch size, climate, topography, markets, personal lifestyle and quality of life goals, profitability goals (remembering that, if it's not profitable, it won't last long), etc.

Perhaps you should consider whether sheep or goats or even pastured poultry could fit into your operation and produce a very good revenue stream while adding significantly to soil health.

If you are firmly set on cattle only, then consider what your cattle operation should comprise.

If cow-calf, for best profitability, should you be a maternal breeder and develop your own replacement heifers? Or, should you produce terminal calves, sell all the calves and buy replacement cows? Or should you be a stocker operator?

I only want to be a little bit sarcastic when I suggest if you live in an area where you feed cows five months of the year, having cows isn't very smart. Stockers in season would be much better. Areas that have that much snow usually have high-quality stocker grazing. Perhaps some combination of cowcalf and yearling operation should be considered.

I can further suggest that most ranchers would be significantly more profitable running a terminal operation rather than a maternal operation. Trust me on this. I have done the arithmetic many times and have managed both maternal and terminal ranches — different ranches under the same ownership. The only way the maternal ranches could compete from a profitability standpoint was if the maternal ranches could inexpensively develop replacement heifers in volume and sell bred cows (not bred heifers) at a premium price to terminal breeders. Then the two ranches would come out about the same. The main reason for the big terminal advantage is that every cow has the possibility of having a calf to sell. In the maternal herd, none of the yearlings will produce a calf to sell. Yet, they are still eating feed.

### **Overheads**

Overheads are necessary for the running of a ranch business. They include:

- People and the tools and equipment needed to make their work efficient and effective.
- The land and structures attached to the land.
- The maintenance of tools, equipment and structures.

If your management will cause both your land value and people's productivity to increase, that is very positive. But you need to be very careful with overheads that rust, rot or depreciate. If you don't need them, you should get rid of them. These decisions are usually much easier to make intellectually than emotionally.

We get attached to stuff. The fastest turn-arounds in ranch profitability that I have seen have occurred when the rancher bites the bullet and gets rid of unnecessary overheads. Sometimes producers had to quit haying or change the calving season to better weather or take other drastic measures to achieve the reduction.

### **Stocking rate**

Cow size and milk production have a big effect on stocking rate, which is a huge determinant to profitability. If you can run more cows on the same land, you will be more profitable. If your ranch will provide enough feed for 100 cows each weighing 1,400 lbs., the same feed will also be nearly enough for 140 cows each weighing 1,000 lbs. The smaller cows will wean smaller calves, but the calves won't be proportionally smaller compared to the dams' size. So, with smaller cows, you will wean significantly more pounds of calf per acre of land, and you will sell those lighter calves for more dollars per pound.

The whole ranch effect of more pounds of calf selling for more per

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pound makes a very significant difference in profit.

### Grazing and pasture management

Grazing and pasture management are where the dollars really start to change.

I know several ranchers who have doubled and a few who have tripled their carrying capacity by using good soil health and regenerative practices. In the meantime, they did not have to add an employee, a tractor, a pickup or fourwheeler, or a saddle horse. The only thing they had to add was more help on the days they worked cattle — branding, shipping, preg checking, etc. — because little weight in the winter and then gain of the increased number of cattle being worked.

One rancher told me he spent about \$50 per acre on stock water development and fencing to make the grazing management work. That enabled him to reduce the acres required per cow-calf pair from 30 to 16 and reduce winter feeding in the meantime. Think of the economic power in that equation.

### Fed feed versus grazed feed

Any time you place a machine or piece of equipment between the mouth of a cow and her feed source, it has just cost you money — especially with the ever-increasing cost of tractors, equipment and fuel. I won't say there aren't times when that cost is justified, because sometimes it is, but we too often let habit and custom justify it rather than a true need.

On the ranches I managed from 1990 to 2010, we didn't own having equipment. We sold it to remove the temptation to put up more hay than we needed for emergencies — the occasional deep snow conditions, which did hap-

We quit having thousands of acres of irrigated meadows and began to pasture them. We greatly reduced the amount of hay produced on subirrigated meadows and pastured them more. I challenge you to reduce the number of days when you feed, and increase the number of days you ask your cows to graze with perhaps a little protein supplementation. Have a contingency plan because you will need it, but don't miss out on all the opportunities Mother Nature gives you to be more profitable and let the cows do the work they were designed to do. This is another huge profit changer.

### Calving season

The selection of a calving season is far more important to profitability than most of us recognize. Think of this the minute a cow calves, her requirement for nutrients nearly doubles.

If you are calving in winter, how do you make that happen cost-effectively? If you are calving in late spring or early summer, nature can provide those nutrients at a much more affordable cost. What happens to the need for calving barns, other facilities and labour when you calve in sync with nature?

I think cows were designed to lose a it back in late spring and summer even with a young calf at side. I think each ranch needs to pick its own "best" calving time. I like it to be after the risk of winter-type storms is very minimal and the breeding season will happen before the grasses begin to deteriorate in the fall.

It is not reasonable to ask cows to graze through most of the winter when the feed quality is not so good and there is snow on the ground and then calve in February and March. That just won't work. However, they can start calving in late April or May and gain body condition rapidly after calving and easily rebreed in late July or August.

### Realized herd fertility

In a perfect ranching world, every cow would get pregnant in the first cycle of the breeding season, carry the calf successfully to a live birth, wean the calf and then each calf would live until it's sold as a calf, yearling, bred yearling, bred cow or cull cow. That will never happen.

But, the closer we come to not using a lot of expensive inputs and instead depend on Mother Nature, adapted cattle, good grazing management and good animal-handling procedures, the more profitable we will be. Fertility and survivability are highly dependent on having cattle that are adapted (see the October 2021 issue).

Wise input use for optimum production

Except for some marketing costs, almost all non-overhead inputs in our cattle operations are wormers, insecticides, immunizations, medicines and feeds, including salt and mineral. While I'm not part of the "no-input" crowd, I am certainly a strong advocate of "lowinput" cattle production. I firmly believe when we select cattle that are adapted to our respective environments and our calving season is correct, Mother Nature provides most of what our animals need. I think we need to take the rough edges off what nature throws at us — terrible weather, drought, diseases from neighbours' herds, etc.

I long ago quit using wormers and insecticides and haven't felt a loss for not using them. I have greatly reduced the number of immunizations, but still think we need some insurance against things that can come from other herds one way or another. When it comes to feed and supplements, we need to meet basic energy and protein needs.

With good grazing management, we should be able to do that most of the time; but we need to fill the gaps in the event of terrible weather situations. When it comes to feed additives, special minerals, etc., I want to feel like I will get at least two dollars back for every dollar spent. Why, you might ask? Because neither our ability nor the ability of the salesperson to predict the advantage is perfect. If the cost of the product should double and I can no longer afford it, what will be the effect on the herd when it is not there for them?

I think we must be very careful when buying those kinds of inputs. And, we need to carefully evaluate protein supplements even when we intend to buy them.

#### **Marketing**

Marketing could have more economic potential for individual ranches than anything in this article except for stocking rate or enterprise selection. Most of us need to devote more time to marketing.

Author: Burke Teichert Original Article: https:// www.canadiancattlemen.ca/livestock/ major-determinants-of-profit/



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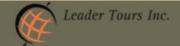
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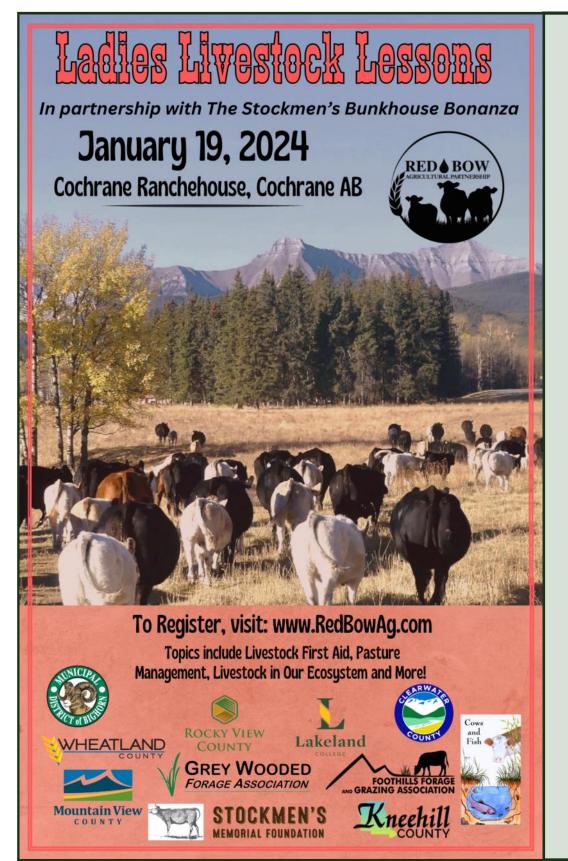
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<u>Mission:</u> Assisting producers in profitably improving their forages and regenerating their soils through innovation and education.

<u>Vision:</u> We envision a global community that respects and values profitable forage production and healthy soils as our legacy for future generations.

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