

Mount 'n Cattle

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Commonalities of Impressive Producers

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I've been anxious to write about this topic for some time and have finally found the time to catch my breath this fall. A group of extension folks this June got together to tour livestock operations we thought were innovative in management in southeast Wyoming.

This tour was the most beneficial, mind-blowing three days I've spent since I started my job. What these producers are doing in terms of management of livestock, natural resources, and their businesses are, in one word, impressive. We visited seven beef cattle production operations over the three days. The commonalities among many of these operations were interesting to reflect upon. Not all operations incorporated each of these principles, but these rose to the top of my and other attendee's minds as common threads among innovative livestock producers.

1. A focus on the members of the ranch team.

The relationships between those members of the ranch team are often something we in the livestock business leave to tradition rather than trying to foster open communication. Without a genuine effort to allow members of the ranch team to

participate in decision making, many of the operations we visited would not be as successful as they are. We discovered that many of these ranches foster communication by holding **scheduled** quarterly or even monthly meetings that allow sharing of goals and finding where efforts and skills can best be utilized. In my opinion, this type of system is the best way to draw the next generation back to the ranch and allow that generation to have meaningful input into management.

2. Focus on cow size and cow efficiency.

Most of the ranches we visited are breeding and selecting cattle with a more moderate-sized and efficient cow in mind. Most recognized their current cattle are larger framed than desired. They are making bull selection and replacement decisions to scale back cow size to reduce feed requirements of larger cows. These ranchers also reported that smaller cows are generally more agile and able to graze where larger ones cannot.

3. Focus on cost reductions and profit.

None of the ranches we visited measured their success by pounds of X or tons of Y they harvested or sold. These ranchers focused on profit. Several would report that managing the way the previous generation did no longer made sense because of operating cost changes. Come to think of it, I don't think we saw a single tractor the entire trip! These ranches focused on reducing overhead costs to improve the bottom line.

4. Calving and weaning by the ranch.

Calving and weaning dates were selected with great consideration. This was not a decision left to tradition. Most ranches we visited were tending toward late spring or early summer calving and weaning early during years of forage shortage. One ranch reported great satisfaction in moving its calving season to a later date. These dates affect all other aspects of the ranch. This decision is critical.

5. Planned grazing.

“Planned chaotic grazing” is one way planned grazing is described, with emphasis on the planning. Many ranches we visited use some form of a rotational grazing system to increase productivity of the land and improve the grazing distribution of cattle. I am amazed at the benefits that a well-run, planned grazing program will provide to the land and the ranch. I think this area provides opportunity for improvement for many ranches as it is a practice that is under utilized. A ranch can work its way into this slowly by splitting up just a few pastures and changing the order pastures are grazed each year. Using one wire of electric fence, rotating water sources or, by simply herding livestock, one can control the time and timing of grazing. We had one experience on this trip that stands out from the rest. A ranch used only a distribution of grass seed and controlled grazing to renovate a weed-infested, unproductive piece of land to a healthy, productive stand in just one year.

Why would we spend hundreds of dollars an acre using expensive machinery and fuel to renovate unproductive land when it can be done so simply? This is quite a change in paradigm for many of us but a likely solution to inflating operating costs.

6. Appropriate application of technical innovations

These ranchers were not opposed to applying technology in their operations. But each new technology was scrutinized for appropriateness and affect on the bottom line. Hidden costs were considered. What impact will it have on one's time? What other tools and equipment will this require? Who is responsible for becoming trained and implementing this? These questions are all important when considering applying new technology.

Thanks to those who opened their ranches to us and for the stimulating conversation along the way. I'm continually impressed by the people in this business we call ranching. Keep up the good work!