



Less Work, More Profit

When reducing inputs on the ranch, don't forget labor

By Katrina Huffstutler

Editor's note: This piece is the fifth in a series of six on the Texas Christian University Institute of Ranch Management Living Laboratory. In this month's installment, we'll focus on optimizing human resources and labor available.

Fifteen years ago, keeping up with agriculture's increasing labor needs was one of the top concerns in the industry. Fast forward to today, and not much has changed.

But while it can be challenging to find workers, there are ways to decrease the need. It's a popular topic for Texas Christian University Institute of Ranch Management instructors, and one that is playing out in real life in the Living Laboratory at Jon Taggart's Burgundy Pasture Beef south of the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex.

Jeffrey Geider, Texas Christian University's William Watt Matthews Director of the Institute of Ranch Management, says that one of the Living Laboratory's main areas of focus is reducing inputs, including labor.

"For example, when someone is intensively trying to grow monocultures of grass, we have discussed how those require a lot more inputs — tractor driving, fertilization, pesticides, herbicides, that sort of thing," Geider says. "But as we decrease those things, we get the fringe benefit of cutting down on the labor needed to perform those duties."

While infrastructure changes cost more upfront, both in time and money, Geider says they will save both in the long run.

"No doubt there is an expense associated with designing and building new working facilities, with fencing, water placement, etc.," Geider says. "But if you manage it and plan it properly in the beginning, then the infrastructure will require little maintenance as you continue ranching year after year. So, you can amortize those costs over a certain period of time, or



you can expense those costs. And in the long term, the payoff comes through a reduced labor force and efficiencies of the animals."

It is not just something he teaches — he has seen it happen at Taggart's ranch.

"Jon and his son, Ben, have spent quite a bit of time and effort developing a system where they can handle the entire herd by themselves and work cattle with very little additional labor ever needed," Geider says.

But the benefits extend beyond the time and money saved. The setup also creates a lower-stress environment for the livestock and a safer environment for both animal and handler. Geider says those benefits can also be seen on the rail.

"There are direct correlations," he explains. "Multiple

Reduce labor on your ranch by:

- Clearing brush
- Redesigning working pens
- Transitioning from traditional windmills to solar-power pumps



studies have shown that how animals are handled affects the quality of the end product. It just goes hand in hand.”

Of course, livestock handling and the related facilities will be dictated by the size of the operation. But that does not mean you have to be big to make improvements, Geider says.

“Even the smallest ranches should take a look at their system. How is the infrastructure situated? Where are the corrals on the ranch? Where are the working facilities? Where do the animals naturally flow? The idea is to try to centrally locate everything, so you don’t have to have duplicate sets of pens,” he explains. “You can be a lot more efficient if you don’t have to move animals to work them or load them or whatever.”

Another way to improve animal handling while saving money in the long-term is to control the brush on your place. Geider says that for native pastureland, he generally recommends including a brush control and maintenance program in the annual and long-range management plans for the ranch.

“The initial costs to clear brush can be very expensive,” he says. “But you are going to allocate a certain amount of assets each year to eventually get into a maintenance program, where it reduces the cost over time.”

Many cattlemen have made or are making the switch from windmills to solar-powered pumps, often because it is becoming too difficult to find people to work on windmills.

“Those people are very, very scarce, so it is a transition born out of necessity,” Geider says. “While I know a lot of ranchers who enjoy having those

traditional windmills on their property, the romance of that old look pales when you have to figure out who will do the repairs and how you are going to pay for it. But you build solar facilities that will last a long time and greatly reduce those costs.”

Geider says these improvements, and others like them, could make a big difference for the bottom line of most cow-calf operations, but it is especially critical considering the labor shortage. It is all about maximizing the use of available workers, and like many cattlemen are used to, doing more with less.

While some of these principles may sound like common sense, he says that is OK.

“That is really one of the messages we want to get across,” Geider says. “I have heard Jon Taggart talk to a lot of groups and a lot of individuals and people, and one of the things he says and we often repeat is, ‘Sometimes we make things more complicated than they need to be.’”

As it turns out, keeping it simple means more than profits, though.

“If you can get back to the basics of proper land management and proper land stewardship, what you find out is that some of the most economical things you can do are also some of the most beneficial things you can do for the ecosystem and for the land,” Geider says.

Jon Taggart’s operation is a shining example. By restoring his land to what it once was and naturally should be, Geider says he has reduced a lot of the labor and expense as compared to what he would have with a more intensively managed, high-input operation.

“To me,” Geider says, “that is the biggest story we hope to tell through the Living Laboratory.” ■