



By investing in improvements on leased land, all parties benefit.

10 THINGS

Tips for thawing your perspective on ranching.

by Troy Smith, field editor

In his book *Elastic: Flexible Thinking in a Time of Change*, author Leonard Mlodinow suggests most, and probably all, of us are susceptible to a phenomenon called “functional fixedness.” People in this psychological state are said to be so accustomed to the way things are, they can’t conceive of things ever being any other way. In a sense, their thoughts about how certain things ought to be done become frozen, and alternative methods aren’t considered.

Sound familiar? Certainly, cattle folk are subject to frozen thought processes. They too can become so accustomed to certain ways of managing their operations that alternative practices are rarely considered. When the methods they view as tried and true are challenged, even good-natured cow people can become defensive.

However, a little discomfort or discord can help thaw frozen thoughts.

Unfortunately, a cow outfit is sometimes brought to the brink of bankruptcy before its manager unfreezes his or her mind. It is better to cultivate critical thought before things go that far.

To encourage producers to look early outside the proverbial box, two producers known for unconventional thinking were

invited to speak at the National Grazing Lands Conference last December in Reno, Nev.

From northwestern Nebraska came Vern Terrell, who ranches near Hay Springs. He and wife Marjean share management with their son, Brock, and daughter-in-law, Heidi. Their operation straddles the Niobrara River, with irrigated farm ground lying to the north and native Sandhills range located south of the river.

Believing in diversification, the Terrell family’s varied livestock enterprises include cow-calf, stocker/backgrounding and sheep. Crops include corn, wheat, edible beans and forages.

Talking about his family’s Black Leg Ranch and other business interests was Jerry Doan of Sterling, N.D. On the ranch

homesteaded by his great-grandfather, Jerry, wife Renae and their three sons, Jeremy, Jay and Jayce, manage cow-calf, custom grazing, farming and hospitality enterprises. They also operate Rolling Plains Adventures, a hunting/outfitting business.

Terrell and Doan are active in their respective state’s grazing-land coalitions. Both have served as mentors, sharing what they’ve learned from their mistakes, as well as their successes. Both

have hosted field days and grassland tours at their ranches, attracting other producers interested in innovation.

At the Reno conference, each of these innovators was asked to talk about 10 things that have made their operations more viable. Their respective lists and comments are summarized as follows.

Vern Terrell

Dare to be different

1► Rent rather than own land. The operation, Terrell Farms, does not own any land and instead relies on leases. Land is rented from 11 different landlords, some of whom are family members. Terrell said the choice to lease is a matter of economics.

“Land values are fairly high, and Nebraska is a high-property-tax state. We figure the operation can rent land for about a third of what it currently would cost to own it,” he explains.

2► Make improvements to leased land. By investing in commonsense improvements to leased land, such as cross-fences, water pipelines and stock tanks, Terrell says the operation benefits from the land’s increased productivity. Making improvements also demonstrates good stewardship and a long-term commitment to caring for the landlord’s property.

3► Buy replacement females. Mature cows are purchased for replacements, and no heifers

are retained. There is no need for a heifer-development program and no need to manage heifers as a separate herd for breeding or for calving.

“We can run more cows, and all are bred to terminal sires, so sourcing genetics is simpler,” adds Terrell.



Vern Terrell shared 10 ways they dare to be different in his family’s Nebraska ranching operation.

Adding a sheep enterprise helped add revenue streams and diversity to the Terrell operation.



4▶ Utilize a long calving season. “We leave bulls out with the cows for about 150 days,” Terrell said, explaining how sorting during the subsequent long calving season results in herds representing three calf age groups. “We start calving about May 15, with all of the cows in one group. After three weeks or so, we’ll sort off the pairs, and that’s our ‘spring’ herd. We’ll sort again in July, making a ‘summer’ herd, and the remainder make up the ‘fall’ herd.” Having calves in three age groups allows for different marketing periods.

5▶ Wean early. At 120-150 days of age, preconditioned calves are fenceline weaned, then moved to the Terrell growing yard. Using homegrown feedstuffs to grow weaned calves reduces the nutritional requirements of their dams and extends grazed forage resources farther into the fall and early winter.

“By preconditioning calves at 90 days of age and weaning this way, calf health is the best ever,” stated Terrell. “That’s good for whoever buys them. It’s questionable whether we get paid any premium for it, but we do it for the sake of the calves.”

6▶ Source new bulls every year. Terrells source bulls from a single breeder every year and use them for a single breeding season. After the breeding season, they are gathered up, tested for trichomoniasis and then sold to a Texas rancher. It’s a routine that’s

worked satisfactorily for several years, eliminating the need to maintain and manage bulls in the off-season.

“We typically sell the bulls for nearly as much as we paid for them,” said Terrell. “Our cost per pregnancy, for the last few years, has ranged from \$15 to \$20.”

7▶ Diversify with multiple species. Several years ago, after wintering some 800 ewes for a feed-short sheepman, the Terrells ended up buying the flock. Adding sheep further diversified the operation and allowed for better utilization of forage resources. Additional saleable products (lamb and wool) are produced on the same land base.

“Predators — coyotes mainly — are the biggest challenge,” admits Terrell. “Right now, the lamb price is down, but wool is up, so it still dollars out pretty good.”

8▶ Convert irrigated acres. “We have turned some of our farm ground into irrigated pasture consisting of grass-legume mixtures. Yields vary some, but we generally get a lot of forage production that we harvest by strip-grazing,” shared Terrell.

Some fields are planted to cover crops for grazing, but production on these fields has been far more

variable; and total forage production, so far, has been lower. However, Terrell views planting cover crops as an investment in the future, due to their soil-building value.

9▶ Buy hay for cows. Relying heavily on grazing of range, improved pastures, cover crops and crop residues, the Terrells minimize hay-feeding. The supplemental hay they do

feed to cows is purchased. The practice saves labor, fuel and equipment costs, but also results in the import of nutrients to the land.

10▶ Custom-background calves. The operation includes a custom grow yard where the Terrells wean and background calves for clients based locally and in neighboring states.

“It provides a market for our crops and another revenue stream,” said Terrell.

Jerry Doan

Add profit, quality of life

1▶ Utilize holistic management. Doan said he and his sons have attended holistic resource management schools, as taught by Allan Savory. “It teaches you to think,” he said, “although I had to go through the school twice before I could really understand.”

As a result, they learned to set goals and apply a systems approach to achieving them.

“We learned that you can manage for profitability and quality of life. You can have both,” stated Doan.



North Dakota rancher Jerry Doan offered 10 ways for increasing profitability and quality of life.

2▶ Utilize planned rotational grazing. Using multiple-paddock grazing systems to allow high animal impact during short grazing periods, followed by long periods of rest and recovery for each paddock has improved the soil, promoted more diversity of plant species and increased forage production.

“The land has become more resilient,” said Doan.

3▶ Focus on production per acre. “Trying to maximize production per animal, by chasing heavier and heavier weaning weights or yearling weights is a flawed model,” opined Doan. “Instead, we strive to increase pounds of animal produced per acre, trying to make every acre productive. That’s the way to improved profitability.”

4▶ Calve in sync with nature. Back when Doans calved early — in late-winter, really — calf scours were a perennial problem, and a costly one. No more; not since they started calving on green grass.

“It’s the number-one best economic decision we ever made,” stated Doan. “It definitely improved our quality of life.”

5▶ Match cattle to the environment. Doan found that big cattle did not fit his production environment. He has moderated cow size to fit a grass-based system with minimal supplementation.

“We still have some cows that are bigger, but our target is an 1,100-pound mature cow,” he explained.

6▶ Use low-maintenance bulls. Bull selection criteria include calving ease, low maintenance requirements and longevity.

“Bulls also have to fit the environment,” insisted Doan. “Overemphasis on high performance can actually reduce profitability. Longevity increases it.”

Continued on page 78

7► Adopt no-till. Doan said no-till farming practices reduce water runoff and erosion. Less water evaporates and more of it infiltrates the soil. Avoiding soil disturbance through tillage enhances soil biology and organic matter.

8► Regenerate soils under range and crops. Doan advocates range management that leaves ample litter to hold moisture and feed soil biology.

“We also believe in integrating livestock and crop production, by rotating crops to allow grazing on cultivated land,” said Doan, noting that manure and urine benefit the soil and can reduce commercial fertilizer requirements. “Multi-species cover-crop mixes offer long-term benefits to the soil. They can be grazed, or they can be hayed and then grazed after regrowth, in the winter.”

9► Plan for winter grazing. To reduce dependence on harvested feed and reduce cow maintenance costs, Doan recommended planning to graze cattle during the winter. Using stockpiled grass, cornstalks or other crop residues, and cover crops can shorten the hay-feeding season. On the Black Leg Ranch, using these resources has reduced harvested feed and feeding expense by about \$200 per head.

10► Diversify. “Find and develop your niches,” advised Doan, explaining how his family added a hunting/outfitting enterprise, including “lodges” to house hunting and fishing guests. His kids also came up with the idea of remodeling a barn to use as an event venue with seating for 450 people. The ranch now hosts weddings and other events on



Jerry Doan calls the decision to calve on green grass the No. 1 best idea for increasing profit and quality of life.

most summertime weekends.

In recent years the Doan family has also introduced a small flock of hair sheep and a few bison as additional livestock enterprises. Additionally, a part of the ranch is devoted to custom grazing. It’s another source of income and adds stocking flexibility. In the event of drought, outside cattle numbers can be reduced or eliminated to save more forage for Doan-owned cattle.

Black Leg Ranch has also ventured into agri-tourism, hosting tour groups consisting of people not associated with agriculture. “It’s a chance to tell the story of what we do on a ranch, how we do it and why,” said Doan, calling that kind of communication good for his operation, in the long run, and good for the industry. |

Editor’s Note: Troy Smith is a cattleman and freelance writer from Sargent, Neb.

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