

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Dancing with Old Man Winter

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Mark Twain once wrote, “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for

sure that just ain’t so.” So it is for those who have affiliated their lives with a landscape where the seasons create tides that ebb and flow — dynamic patterns where subtle changes in intensity drive dramatic changes not realized in the moment.

In such an environment, one can be lured into a belief that the patterns are relatively predictable based on past experience and the deferred nature of its consequences and outcomes. It is in these moments when people boldly, but illogically, believe that they know for sure what is to come.

Caution

My father’s cautionary advice was to understand that “When your advance is going too smoothly, you are about to walk into an ambush.”

We ranch in a valley often described as a place with three months of summer, seven months of winter, and 60 days of poor sledding. With winter seemingly always in reach, one falls into the trap that one winter will be more or less like another.

While the occasional remarkable storm might put our plans off center, the greatest danger always lies in our failure to remember that it is the relentless effect of cold, snow and

ice that ultimately yields negative consequences.

Like the stone cutter who pounds away at the rock, Old Man Winter is patient. To outwit him requires preventative maintenance, playing out the hypotheticals, and building alternative plans to increase preparation and responsiveness.

A preventative mindset requires

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focusing well ahead of winter’s onset on maintenance of key equipment and infrastructure. Assuring uninterrupted delivery of feed and water to livestock is the first objective of our winter work, while doing so safely for people.

Changing air and oil filters; staying on schedule with oil changes; adding anti-gelling compounds to the fuel; swapping out worn starters, alternators and hydraulic components; and assuring battery performance are key steps to increase the odds that equipment will perform under winter conditions.

Furthermore, if the risk of being snowed in for a period of time is relatively high, stocking the shop with key parts and components offsets the risk of losing functionality during high-stress conditions. Servicing cattle-handling equipment, water systems, and feed-handling equipment provides additional risk management.

Contingency planning is a methodology that allows the management team to work through a series of potential scenarios or “what if” situations. For example, what are the effects of a storm that disrupts power for a prolonged period of time? Working through

the possible consequences might yield issues such as:

- ▶ disruption of water delivery if the enterprise is dependent on electric well pumps;
- ▶ inability to access some feedstuffs if feed-handling systems require electricity;
- ▶ inability to heat engine blocks without power to plug-ins; and
- ▶ loss of hot water in calving barns.

Other cases might include high levels of snow accumulation that close roads for an extended period of time, or several weeks of continuous excessively cold weather.

Working through the effects of these scenarios provides insight and awareness about problems that will likely have to be addressed if winter conditions are severe. Once the challenges are identified, the management and operational team can develop alternate plans to deal with adverse conditions, and they can develop a list of the resources that will be required for each.

Winter conditions can be dangerous. An additional component of preparing for winter is to develop an intentional approach to assure family and employee safety. Elements of the process include developing a communications strategy, equipping vehicles with emergency kits, and training staff for safety.

To Twain’s point, we just don’t know what Old Man Winter’s mood will be in the upcoming months. However, preventative maintenance and situational planning go a long way toward being ready for whatever dance he chooses. |

Editor’s note: In “Outside the Box,” a regular, separate column in both the *Angus Journal*® and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship.