

Outside the Box

Repair, replace or improve.

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln



“You get to a certain point in life and it’s just patch, patch, patch,” exclaimed my

94-year-old friend and mentor. His comment left me pondering the balancing act we call ranching — an enterprise where it seems we are in constant discussion about what to repair, replace or improve. Around our place, the list can be categorized into several buckets:

1 Breeding stock

The first point gets a lot of attention as we seek to identify heifers and bulls that are better suited to our ecosystem, as well as the demands of the marketplace. Genetic merit is certainly a cornerstone of a productive cow herd, and improving upon it involves a decision-making process that most cattle producers find both fulfilling and frustrating as we seek to turn potential into

performance and then into profit margin.

2 Equipment and vehicles

Accessing and maintaining equipment and vehicles is a game bounded by depreciation schedules, cost of replacement, operational costs, human productivity and labor availability.

It has been said that if an item rusts, rots or depreciates, own as little of it as possible. Such a philosophy helps to hold both fixed and variable costs in check.

The concept is further enhanced when we apply stewardship. If you own it, borrow it or rent it, take good care of it.

3 Infrastructure

Infrastructure entails buildings, fences, corrals, wells, tanks, gates and pipelines. Prudent investments in infrastructure ought to create improved

productivity, better management and health of pastures and rangelands, and less time in crisis management.

In many situations, we spend a lot of time engaged in repairing and replacing fences. Riding a fenceline to find and fix problems always reminds me of Jake, Ace Reid’s cartoon cowboy featured in *Cowpokes*.

He was forever stringing together weathered stretches of barbed wire

attempting to hold the herd. It would be interesting to know just how many collective hours ranchers spend on the fencing crew!

The techies tell me we are not too far from virtual fencing becoming a reality. I’m not quite ready to retire the fence stretchers, but who knows? Maybe the fencing pliers will become a family heirloom someday — placed upon the mantel as a reminder of the good old days!

4 People and talent

It’s the last two buckets that have been grabbing my attention lately.

Turnover of ownership, management and labor is a certainty. Replacing people is an activity too often accomplished under duress instead of with an intentional process designed to not only replace, but improve and enhance talent.

A great set of replacement heifers, a functional set of pens and a well-maintained set of

equipment aren’t much use without the application of human talent. Of all the activities undertaken by the leadership of a business venture, nothing is more critical to the future success of the organization than having the right team.

5 Ideas and habits

The last bucket — replacing and improving habits and mindset — is one that if left unattended may torpedo all the efforts made in the four categories preceding it. Mark Twain’s most powerful observation was, “It’s not what we don’t know that gets us into trouble; it’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so.”

When we leave our assumptions unexamined and stubbornly cling to habits and ideas in serious need of being updated, refreshed and improved, the stage is set for stagnation, decline and ultimately failure. Lifelong learning, active curiosity and a commitment to staying engaged with new ideas and bright people is an investment that pays dividends without fail.

As we head into the future, take time to broaden the scope of your thinking about what needs to be replaced and improved. It will be time well spent. **ABB**

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.

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In farming and ranching, we are in constant discussion about what to repair, replace or improve.