

The Digestive Tract

Develop, execute nutrition plan to reach objectives.

by Dan Shike, University of Illinois



If you have been in the cow-calf business for very long, you have likely made

management decisions that, looking back, maybe were not the best, while other decisions look pretty smart. Sometimes split-second decisions have to be made, but often, better planning and clear goals will minimize the number of reactive decisions.

George Terry, an author and scholar on management, defined management as “a *distinct process consisting of planning,*

organizing, actuating and controlling; utilizing in each both science and art, and followed in order to accomplish predetermined objectives.”

While I am fairly confident that was not written for management of a cow-calf operation, I believe every bit of it applies.

Predetermined objectives

First, note the final part — “accomplish predetermined objectives.” This is so important to keep in context. What are your goals and objectives? Not your neighbors’, not the seedstock operation’s where you

buy your bulls, and not the goals or objectives of the generation before you.

Who you sell your cattle to and when you plan to market them have significant effects on how you should manage your herd.

As input costs continue to rise, and decisions have to be made on where to spend money and where to save money, it is essential you have a clear vision of your goals and objectives. Collecting and benchmarking herd performance and production records are vital parts of the management process.

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Goals and objectives of operations evolve and change over time. If you have not thought about this recently, I challenge you to do so.

Write them down. A recent study by a psychology professor at Dominican University in California found you were 42% more likely to achieve your goals if they were written down. I am not aware of any work testing

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this theory in beef production, but I suspect there would be a similar trend.

Planning and organizing

Some people get really excited about planning and organizing, and others have very little interest. I have seen managers who are very good at managing situations and creating solutions in real-time or, as some like to refer to it, “putting out fires.” However, if every day is putting out fires, it may be a sign that not enough planning and organizing is occurring.

With cow-calf operations, the real challenge is that you have to plan for the unexpected. With the majority of cow-calf operations being grazing-based, the unpredictability of weather (drought, mud, snow, heat) requires emergency plans be in place so you are prepared for these adverse events.

With drought conditions covering much of the United States last year and into this year, many producers have been faced with challenging decisions of culling or buying expensive feed. Your plans should include assessing the carrying capacity of your pastures, projected number of grazing days, and harvested and stored feed inventories. The condition of pastures last fall, winter moisture and long-term forecasts all need to be considered when determining appropriate stocking rates and grazing days for the upcoming grazing season.

If available resources do not match current herd size, you have



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If available resources don't match current herd size, now is the time to be considering your options. Waiting till July or August could cost you opportunities and money.

to make some decisions. The most common options would be to either cull cows and/or provide supplemental feed. You could also consider early weaning to remove grazing pressure on pastures and reduce nutritional needs of cows later in the summer.

Whichever of these options you are considering, you should be planning now. If you wait until July or August, you have likely missed opportunities and cost yourself money.

It is no secret hay supplies are extremely tight in some parts of the country. Utilizing cornstalks, wheat straw or other crop residues can be very economical alternatives, particularly if you are feeding a total mixed ration (TMR) and have access to distillers' grains or other energy- and protein-dense grain coproducts.

Utilizing summer annuals could also be an option for producing some extra forage this next year. Summer annuals can be a great

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tool, but they come with their own risks and management concerns. Reach out to your local extension agent or seed rep and discuss what options could make sense in your region.

Cover crops seeded in late summer could provide late-fall grazing opportunities. If seeding is not an option until later in the fall, you will have to rely on spring grazing or harvesting (baling or ensiling). Again, work with seed reps in your area to identify which cover crops or blends work well in your climate and could help meet some of your forage needs.

Actuating and controlling

A plan without action isn't much of a plan. Good intentions do not pay bills. One of the many challenges facing the ag industry as a whole is labor. Cow-calf operations are certainly familiar with this. Managing the day-to-day grind of any livestock production enterprise can be taxing, particularly when there often isn't enough labor.

Efficiently and effectively implementing management decisions is essential. What this looks like at each operation can vary greatly. Your production calendar and labor availability will dictate what times of the year you are able to devote more to maintenance and "projects." But simply waiting until we get "caught up" to start on a project is not a good management strategy.

Utilize science and art

On first glance, you might not think this applies to beef cattle production. However, I wholeheartedly believe it does. You can have all the knowledge in the world and be up to date on the most cutting-edge

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science, but if you are not able to see the situation (art), you will not know how and when to apply the science.

Some of the best managers I have been around see things others do not. They see when the cows are starting to get thin, not just when they are too thin. They see when a calf is just starting to get sick, not when it is too late to save it. They see when the pastures are starting to not keep up.

Effective management requires boots on the ground. Rotating pastures weekly works well in many places, but sometimes that is too long or not long enough. Just because your cows are typically in ideal condition going into calving, doesn't mean they will be every year. It takes a critical eye to know when plans need to be adjusted. Study the cows, study the pastures and study the equipment. Study the science. One without the other is not nearly as effective.

In summary

Write down your goals and objectives. Develop a plan. Implement and carry out the plan. Keep up to date on new technology and management practices. Keep your boots on the ground and your eyes open. This year will have its own set of challenges, but it may be one of your best yet. **ABB**

Editor's note: "The Digestive Tract" is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* focused on nutrition for the beef cattle life cycle. Dan Shike is associate professor in animal sciences at the University of Illinois.