

Outside the Box: What's your wellness score?

by **TOM FIELD**,
director of the
*Engler Agribusiness
Entrepreneurship
Program*,
University of Nebraska



Without question, herd health is a pivotal goal for a successful cattle enterprise and, as such, it deserves an investment of resources to assure that planning, prevention, monitoring, assessment and treatment regimens and protocols are in place. However, with all

due respect to my friends in the veterinary and pharmaceutical business, herd health is far too often defined narrowly as a program of managing disease prevention and treatment supported by a set of standardized vaccination or therapy protocols. Determining the

health of a cow-calf enterprise is better attained via a systems-management view that encompasses assessment of cattle, financial, ecosystem and human resources.

It's simply not enough to only ask the question "Are my cattle healthy?" A more appropriate approach is to assess the health status of the enterprise in total.

For example, human health professionals are increasingly interested in determining "wellness" with awareness that there are an intricate set of connections and linkages among lifestyle; behavior; stress level; relationships with friends, family and co-workers; financial success and a host of other factors that ultimately affect health status. This systems approach shifts the focus from a narrow to a broader view.

Taking a broader view

Determining the "wellness" of a cow-calf enterprise depends on effective evaluation and monitoring of the following system components:

- a. People (management, employees and families)
- b. Natural resources (watersheds, plant community composition and productivity, soil stability and fertility, etc.)
- c. Financial (profitability, debt repayment capacity, debt-to-equity ratio, cash flow, cost of production, etc.)
- d. Cattle productivity (percent calf crop weaned, cow longevity, morbidity and mortality rates, sale weights, etc.)
- e. Additional enterprise productivity within the business model
- f. Infrastructure integrity (dependability and longevity of equipment and facilities, conformance to service schedules, etc.)

Consider a situation where cattle productivity is historically at or above relevant comparative standards — reproductive rates are excellent, disease rates are well within normal expectations, and growth rates of all cattle classes are on track with the goals of management. The operation has grown, debt has been retired ahead of schedule, and cost of production has been managed effectively. Pastures are in great shape, invasive plant species are limited, and watersheds are healthy.

Wellness check failure

However, the people involved in the enterprise are at the limit of their capacity to put in more hours; they are operating on suboptimal levels of rest, meals are taken on the run and often lack key nutrients, stress is accumulating and manifests in poor communication, short tempers and reactive behavior.

In this situation, the enterprise

cannot be classified as having obtained a high level of wellness. In fact, the business is in danger of significant setbacks due to a crew that is near its breaking point. Without corrective action, people on the verge of exhaustion will likely make poorer decisions, such as getting sloppy in executing correct procedures in critical tasks such as vaccination, cattle handling or feed delivery.

Damage to facilities and equipment may also result due to operator error brought on by stress and fatigue. These failures have the potential to undercut the health of the enterprise by reduced cattle performance, incurring avoidable costs, and loss of teamwork and synergistic effort.

Consider all aspects

The set of scenarios that can be created where enterprise health is compromised are numerous, and the potential effects would likely play out in divergent ways unique to any particular situation or setting. However, the common theme is that the health of an enterprise is multifaceted and requires that decision makers step back from the situation and survey their business broadly with a deep awareness of the interconnectivity inherent in the enterprises and resources under their watch. Furthermore, they must appreciate the consequences of failing to recognize the effects of these interactions when making management and leadership decisions.

For example, a scheduled series of vaccines as part of a preventative health management plan makes a lot of sense. However, if that vaccination schedule is applied in a vacuum, without considering the potential effects of cattle handling, transportation, weaning, weather and employee training on immune response, high performance outcomes should not be assumed. Peter Senge, director of the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT, says that many problems are the result of yesterday's solutions where a fix in one part of a system administered without thought to its effects throughout may yield cures that are far more damaging than the original problem.

Assessing the wellness of an enterprise and implementing strategies to enhance its overall health offer opportunities for discovering the critical junctures and relationships within a system that offer the best hope for significant improvement. Such an approach is more challenging, requires thinking beyond the seemingly endless list of things that must be done within each silo of our business (health, nutrition, genetics, marketing, financing and so forth) and eventually forces assumptions to be questioned and historic patterns of activity to be shifted.

Don't Miss Out!

Sign up for the Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA by:

- Signing up at www.angusbeefbulletin.com (look for signup in upper left corner); or
- E-mailing bulletinextra@angusbeefbulletin.com with SUBSCRIBE in the subject line.



The EXTRA is designed to provide news and information electronically to Angus Beef Bulletin subscribers between published issues.



Editor's Note: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the Director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska.