

Veterinary Link: Role of your veterinarian in your business

by **BOB LARSON,**
*professor of production
medicine, Kansas State
University*



There are many people who impact the success of your ranching business, including your customers, your lenders and your suppliers. One of the important suppliers for cow-calf producers is the local veterinarian. Veterinarians can provide important advice and service to

improve ranch income, decrease costs, provide protection from losses due to disease and offer options for marketing high-health cattle.

Ranch income is primarily derived from the sale of calves either at weaning for commercial operations or as breeding

bulls or heifers for seedstock producers. Commercial ranchers can increase their income by increasing the pounds of calves at weaning, and seedstock operations can increase the number of marketable breeding animals from the same land and cow resources by increasing the reproductive efficiency of the herd. Veterinarians can provide advice and services to monitor and evaluate heifers, cows and bulls so that a high percentage of the herd is able to successfully mate at the start of each breeding season.

Nutrition has an important impact on whether or not growing bulls and heifers reach puberty at an appropriate age, and your veterinarian may be able to provide you with appropriate diets to meet targeted weight-gain goals. Genetics also strongly influence whether developing bulls and heifers reach puberty by target ages, and your veterinarian is a valuable resource when considering selection and culling decisions.

By doing breeding soundness examinations (sometimes referred to as BSEs) of bulls and heifers near yearling age, your veterinarian can help you identify the individuals that reach puberty at the time and with the amount of feed resources that you have identified to meet your ranch goals.

Doing breeding soundness examinations of mature bulls prior to the start of each breeding season allows your veterinarian to remove bulls that may fail during the breeding season due to foot or leg problems, other health problems, or reproductive tract problems.

Although the reproductive tracts of mature cows are not routinely evaluated before the start of each breeding season, managing and monitoring the cows to confirm that a high percentage of the cows calve early enough in the calving season and in good enough body condition to resume fertile cycles by the start of the breeding season helps to ensure that herd reproductive efficiency will be high.

Monitoring body condition scores of the cow herd and rainfall amounts as predictors of future forage production potential allows your veterinarian to provide advice on a changing year-by-year basis to alter stocking density, timing of weaning, and supplementation strategies to ensure that cows enter the calving and breeding seasons in good body condition.

The land base and herd size dictate much of the cost side of cow-calf production, and making sure that a high percentage of the cow herd becomes pregnant early in the breeding season allows those costs to be spread over a large number of marketable calves. By using body

condition scores collected at several key points in the production cycle, your veterinarian can help you fine-tune the management of your herd based on the ranch forage base, the availability of cost-effective supplements or grazing alternatives, and the optimum cow size and milking ability for your herd.

While every production year is expected to generate income from the sale of calves and to incur expenses associated with pasture and supplementation costs, as well as cow depreciation and bull costs, significant losses due to disease are expected to be rare events for cattle operations. Cost-effective risk-management strategies are needed for those losses that are expected to occur rarely, if at all, but that could have a devastating impact on the financial status of a ranch if they did occur.

By doing breeding soundness examinations (sometimes referred to as BSEs) of bulls and heifers near yearling age, your veterinarian can help you identify the individuals that reach puberty at the time and with the amount of feed resources that you have identified to meet your ranch goals.

Because disease losses do not occur every year, providing no defense may appear to be a sufficient and very low-cost management strategy in the short-run. However, over a longer timeframe, it would be very unusual for a herd with minimal disease protection to avoid devastating financial losses due to disease at some point in the future. Your veterinarian can provide valuable information about the likelihood that your herd could suffer losses from various diseases and the expected magnitude of those losses should your herd be exposed. By considering the likelihood of a disease, the magnitude of losses associated with that disease and the effectiveness of available control strategies, your veterinarian can work with you to optimize the disease risk management of your ranching business.

Marketing of cattle, whether feeder calves or breeding animals, increasingly includes information about health status. When considering the optimum herd health program from a marketing standpoint, the risks that downstream buyers face and their willingness to purchase from suppliers who can reduce that risk must be considered. For example, your herd

may have very low risk for a disease and incurring expenses through diagnostic testing or herd certification may not reduce your herd's already minimal risk; but the costs could easily be offset by customers willing to pay for that low disease risk. Increasingly, you must think of your downstream customers as you work with your veterinarian to plan a health program that not only meets the

needs of your herd, but also provides a cost-effective marketing advantage.

A successful cattle business requires a combination of cattle and business expertise. Many successful ranchers count on a trusted team of advisors and suppliers to help them improve the profitability and sustainability of their ranching business. Finding and working with a local veterinarian who can provide

assistance to increase income, control costs and manage risks should be a goal of every cattle producer.



Editor's Note: *Bob Larson is a veterinarian and professor of production medicine at Kansas State University's College of Veterinary Medicine.*