

BeefTalk 791: Flexible Planning Starts With Practical Cow Sort Lists

Cowherd planning requires sorting, and it is best done when the cows come home.

Don't join the "I wish I had sorted the cows!" club.

Things change. Weather turns colder or harsher than expected, draining feed resources. A mild winter may make everyone happy until drought forecasts show up. Families may change, the help may change or even the boss may change.

Cows are labor-intensive, and a slip on ice, a sick spell or the many variations of life can have significant impact on the labor force involved with the cow herd. As the owner or manager, a long-term cattle-handling plan needs to be in place in case of unexpected change.

Finding the right help on short notice is difficult. When the short notice extends in time, managerial adjustments become mandatory.

The long-term plan should provide for the maintenance of cow numbers and potential growth of the herd, and potential inventory reduction if needed. So think and have a plan that starts today, not tomorrow.

The biggest obstacle in working cattle is simply getting started and bringing the cows to the work facility. Generally, the cows are in larger groups, and working a few cows usually means working all the cows.

Here's kind of a side note: How many cows actually fit in a portable corral? Good question. I do remember standing on a panel rail looking over the cows as they lunged. I found myself being wheeled along with the movement of the portable corral. Fortunately, the corral was on wheels and the lunge stopped, but the feeling was scary nevertheless. The movement of 100 or more cows and calves is a force that simply will bend metal.

Working smaller groups of cattle in a slower fashion generally yields a more positive experience. Those smaller groups can be created by good sorting when the cows are in the chutes. Knowing that, develop a sensible plan.

Think through the year and ask what management practices need to be done. Get input from the family and help who handle the cattle, and discuss the expectations of how the cattle will be managed in the future.

Cows and calves are available for handling once or twice in the fall. This gathering is the primary opportunity to sort the cattle, often dictating the movement of cattle for the next 12 months. By sorting the cattle into logical groups or having a marking system, cattle can be sorted more easily in the future.

Some practical suggestions are:

- Pen one - These are the open or structurally unsound cows. Pregnancy check and evaluate for injuries, bad udders, bad eyes or other limiting physical defect. This pen is for the soon-to-be-sold cows.

- Pen two - This is for the poor, wild or unruly mothers. If you ever need help, these are not the cows you want new or inexperienced help to work. So pull them out of the main cow herd. Better yet, just add them to Pen 1.

Fall Cow Sorting List

Pen one	—	Open, dry and/or unsound cows, sell
Pen two	—	Poor mothers, wild mothers, sell
Pen three	—	Nine year old and older cows, sell
Pen four	—	Marginal cows, too fat, too thin, sell
Pen five, six and seven	—	Cows calving outside the desired calving season, sell
Pen eight	—	All younger cows calving late, sell
Pen nine	—	All lower-producing cows, sell
Pen ten	—	Starting with the older cows, gradually reduce cows until ranch resources are met

- Pen three - Mark all 9-year-old and older cows as potentially for sale. If times change, these cows have seen their best days already.
- Pen four - These are marginal cows (too thin or too fat). Either way, they have a questionable productive future and don't seem to respond to your management, so they make a logical group to sell later.
- Pens 5, 6 and 7 - Sort based on severity of a potential herd reduction. If a few extra cows need to go, take pen 5; if you need a few more to go, add pen 6; a big cut would add pen 7. Essentially, this is the time to be critical of late-calving cows and develop some sale packages of bred cows that do not match your desired calving time or management.
- Pen 8 - This group is really tough because it implies substantial herd reduction. These cows would not be marked, but they may just be on a list. They are younger cows that did not calve in the first three weeks of the calving season, that is, those calving late. You realize they will not produce as heavy of a calf, and selling them will allow for the retention of the more super-productive 5- to 8-year-old cows.
- Pen 9 - This is the list of the leftover cows based on production. Keep in mind that a cow reaches her prime at age 5, so 5- to 9-year-old cows have excellent value as bred cows, with the maximum opportunity to produce big calves.
- Pen 10 - The last pen is the going-out-of-business cows and the last that would leave. These are the core cows, well worth keeping.

Again, keep in mind that cows are seldom brought home and worked, a key point in the management of beef cows and implementation of managerial plans. Every opportunity needs to be taken advantage of when the cows are in the chutes this fall. This is the time to be thinking ahead and placing cows in the groups that make change easier to manage if needed.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

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