

## **Cattle Business in Mississippi – January 2010 “Beef Production Strategies” article**

### **Last Minute or Late Ranch Decisions**

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The saying, “Time is money,” is very applicable to beef cattle production and marketing decisions. It may at first seem that waiting until the last minute to make an operational decision or making a late decision has only minor impacts at best. However, the cumulative effect of a lack of timeliness in decision making and implementation can cost the operation significant funds or result in notable production losses. In some situations, just one slow decision or action can seriously hurt the operation.

#### **Purchasing Management**

Beef cattle operations utilize many different supplies, from breeding supplies to feeding supplies. Producers attempting to acquire supplies last minute can find that supplies are out-of-stock or not carried locally. This can lead to use of substitute products, which in the case of animal health products can change the herd health program against veterinary advice. In case where supplies must be acquired immediately, additional expense from rush orders with quick shipping and handling can unnecessarily add to ranch operating costs. For producers who strive to support their local economies, advance notice can allow some products to be purchased locally upon request.

Some supplies, such as feed and hay, vary in seasonal availability, price, and quality. To take advantage of lower price levels, watch market conditions and supplies closely, and know when to act on purchases. Consider the typical declines in forage quality late in growing seasons when trying to buy hay. Local hay supplies may become tight and require producers to search elsewhere for hay at additional freight expense if not acquired initially.

When buying cattle, keep track of sale dates or risk missing important cattle sourcing opportunities. Producers who purchase replacement heifers or bulls private treaty may find that breeders are “picked over” if waiting too long before looking for these cattle. This can impact the quality of cattle ultimately purchased or the cost to get the desired quality.

#### **Marketing Management**

By not paying close attention to the calendar, nomination or consignment dates for special sales can pass without producer action. Cattle may not be eligible for these sales if management practices such as weaning or vaccinations are not accomplished on time and according to sale rules. Not watching market trends carefully can result in missed chances to market cattle at desirable price levels.

For seedstock producers, not following up with cattle customers in a timely manner can give the impression of poor customer service. Producers planning sales or events such

as field days on their ranches affect the marketability of their cattle by the presentation of the ranch and cattle. It takes time to properly prepare operations and cattle for these events, and this often cannot be adequately accomplished last minute.

### **Cattle Management**

Developing growing cattle to reach target weights can be compromised when animal growth and nutritional programs are not monitored and adjusted in a timely manner. Bull and heifer development delays can negatively impact animal productivity, yearling data, and marketability. Although there can be reproductive benefits from providing females with a flush of nutrition just prior to breeding, a heifer may not be able to initiate cycling if development targets become unattainable from waiting too long to increase nutrition. Similarly, target body condition scores for cows at calving or bulls at the beginning of the breeding season are only met when cattle are provided with enough nutrition over an adequate period of time to make needed gains. Producers who finish steers for freezer beef also know that meeting backfat thickness targets within specified cattle age ranges requires adequate nutrition over time.

Other cattle management practices require timeliness or even precise timing. Delaying herd health practices such as immunizations can jeopardize cattle health. Not committing to detecting estrus at needed times can devastate an artificial insemination program.

### **Forage Management**

Successful forage establishment and management are greatly affected by timing of planting, fertilization, weed control practices, and harvest. Late planting can result in stand failure, stand losses, or reduced yields. Late fertilization can miss optimum rainfall events or growing conditions and not improve forage yields and quality as much as could have occurred. Late weed control can be largely ineffective. If grazing cattle are not removed from paddocks in a timely manner, some paddocks will be overgrazed while others become overmature. Delayed hay harvests increase forage maturity and lower forage quality.

### **People Management**

Some ranch activities require additional labor or are accomplished more effectively or efficiently with this extra labor. Labor availability, including veterinary labor, is sometimes a problem. This is especially the case when arranged last minute. Management practices may have to be rescheduled in some instances due to labor constraints if not locked in ahead of time. This can impact production.

By scheduling breeding programs in advance, for example, producers can avoid cattle handling and associated labor needs on holidays if desired. Turning out bulls late or scheduling artificial insemination or embryo transfer dates after desired times can delay or lengthen a controlled calving season. Once this occurs, it takes much more time and effort to back up to the original calving dates. Weaning weights can suffer with production of these later calves.

## **Records Management**

Seedstock cattle weaning and yearling measurements must take place within designated age windows set by breed associations. If not, then adjusted weights may not be calculated and data may not be accepted for use in national cattle evaluations that generate expected progeny differences (EPDs). Data collected on time but not submitted to breed associations in a timely manner may also miss upcoming EPD runs and delay EPD updates and accuracy improvements on the affected cattle. Many breed associations also have fee structures that financially penalize breeders for delayed submissions of registrations or transfers.

Tax records must also be managed in a timely manner to provide the most financial benefit to the cattle operation. It may be beneficial to include ranch purchases or marketings on a specific tax year, so some transactions are best to occur before the end of the tax year and others into the next tax year. Waiting until the last week of December to assess or plan this can limit what can be done. Also, waiting too long to actually file ranch tax forms can result in financial penalties.

On the surface, procrastination may seem harmless to the ranching operation, but it can hurt production and profitability. Take time to plan ahead and follow through with production and marketing tasks. Keeping a calendar of events and to-do list handy for the beef cattle operation can help keep things happening in a timely manner. For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.