When I started at the Noble Foundation in the late 1970s, agriculture in the Southern Great Plains was still dominated by traditional producers engaged primarily in forage-based beef production. Most operations were fairly large and run by experienced full-time farmers and ranchers. Over the last two decades, the number of these producers has declined. Being sandwiched between the metro areas of Dallas/Fort Worth and Oklahoma City, we’ve seen a tremendous increase in small, often novice landowners. What hasn’t changed in 30-plus years is the fact that most producers seek our consultation services after they’ve been in business long enough for issues to arise that range from minor to critical.

Rarely do we get an initial request for consultation before someone has chosen and invested in an enterprise and has begun operation. When we can get in on the ground floor with a new producer, there are some basic concepts that we make sure are grasped immediately, and management of a livestock enterprise is at least third down on the hierarchy. First are the soils and forages on the property and realistic expectations of the amount of dry matter that can be grown. That number determines stocking rate, which must be appropriate for anything else to work. Once an appropriate stocking rate is determined, there are five basics I believe should be in place before a livestock enterprise is undertaken.

1. Ensure that you have a sound perimeter fence that will contain the class and species you will run. Be aware that small ruminants have different fencing requirements than beef cattle.
2. Have a corral and a means to restrain the animals. It certainly does not
have to be elaborate, but it does need to be functional. This is needed to be able to receive and ship, implement health protocols, and address other health-related issues that will arise from time to time.

3. Develop a good relationship with a veterinarian, including a mutually agreed upon comprehensive health protocol for all classes you will be managing. The protocol should be in place and ready to implement when the livestock arrive. I also believe every producer should be Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) certified, which is usually accomplished through the state extension service. BQA is a nationwide program from the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, but the principles are applicable to other species as well.

4. Have a sound understanding of the factors that affect the nutritional requirements of all classes of livestock – factors like age, sex, weight, stage of reproduction, level of milk production, body condition score, desired rate of gain, weather, etc. It is an eye opener to many new producers to learn that a lactating cow needs twice as much protein and at least 50 percent more energy than when she was not nursing a calf. There are many sources of nutrient requirements for all livestock.

5. Be aware that adequate nutrition and health is paramount to reproductive performance. Reproductive performance is a direct indication of appropriate stocking rate, effective health and nutrition programs, and management in general. Reproductive performance drives the amount of product you eventually sell, which will determine income and personal satisfaction.

As livestock producers, it is our responsibility to contain our animals, be able to address problems as they arise, to know diseases and parasites that can harm them, to provide protection from those diseases and parasites, to know the nutrient requirements of all classes of livestock at all stages of production, and ensure they are receiving adequate nutrition. There are many sources of information and education for producers. Success depends on understanding that soil and forage management, health, nutrition, reproduction, and marketing are interconnected and interdependent. It is our job as livestock producers to use this understanding to care for our livestock.