

LIVESTOCK

Skid steer loaders can improve ranch efficiency

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For many ranches, a skid-steer loader is just as vital to the operation as a feed truck or a four wheeler. These machines are extremely versatile. They have a

small footprint for their capacity, and a good operator can make quick work of common tasks. However, there are several things to consider before purchasing a machine.

Skill level

Operating controls can be awkward for new users. It takes time and patience to become a proficient operator.

Test drive

You wouldn't buy a new truck without a test drive. The same should be true for machines. Many dealers will allow serious buyers to "demo" a new machine. Always test drive the brand and size of machine you want to buy before making a purchase, even if you have to rent it. Each brand will have different visibility, control options and weight-to-power ratios.

New or used

New machines will always have the latest upgrades and the shiniest paint. They come without the worries of past



abuse but usually cost the most. If you are the kind of person who always buys a brand new truck, this might be the best option for you. However, there are many good used machines available. Unless you know what to look for, it is best to buy used machines from a dealer. If you don't buy from a dealer, be suspicious of fresh paint, rust and oil leaks. Always open the inspection panels and raise the cab. Ask for maintenance records and about any repairs. It is buyer beware. Great deals might mean that it's stolen; check the serial number.

Size and power

Decide what operations the machine will perform and buy a machine to fit your needs. The biggest machine is not always the best. Evaluate the lift height and tipping load specifications relative to what you plan to move. Consider height constraints in pens and buildings, the width of openings and how often you will haul it on a trailer. Typically, a skid steer is easier to haul than a tractor with the same capacity. ▶

Tracks or tires

Rubber tracks have a larger footprint and tend to be easier on grass. Consider these for use in muddy areas and when use in pastures is common. They provide better traction but cost more to replace than tires. Steel tracks that install over the tires are also available. These provide the most traction but are the hardest on grass. If the primary use will be on concrete, consider solid tires over pneumatic for longer life.

How much is it needed on the operation

Seriously consider what a skid steer is needed for on your operation. If you can think of uses to justify the purchase, it should be an easy decision because you will find many other uses you hadn't considered.

Optional Equipment

Think about what attachments you might need for your operation before buying a machine. Make sure it has auxiliary hydraulics at a flow rate ap-

propriate for any future attachments. Keep in mind that you can rent various attachments that you only need occasionally. Specialty items, like an auger bucket, will have to be purchased. Finally, a cab with heat and air conditioning is nice but the door can make it difficult to get in and out of the cab.

It is hard to imagine all the uses for a skid steer around a farm or ranch. Below is a partial list of possibilities. The ideas are endless with the number and diversity of attachments available. A skid steer will not replace a tractor, especially for PTO driven implements, but they can increase the efficiency of many ranch operations.

Potential skid-steer loader uses

- **Fence building:** Remove old posts and wire, dig corner and line post holes, drive t-posts, shape water gaps, and clear brush.
- **Handling hay:** A properly sized skid steer is faster than a tractor when loading and unloading hay,

and can be used to feed hay.

- **Handling feed:** Mix and deliver rations, and handle pallets of mineral and feed. A skid steer enables bulk flat storage.
- **Manure management:** Scrape pens, clean up hay feeding areas in the spring, and load and spread manure.
- **Road maintenance:** Spread gravel, fix holes and drainage, and push snow.
- **Brush clearing:** Preparing fire guards, remove small brush and use as tree shears for larger trees.
- **Water:** Trench lines, install tanks, excavate breaks and add rock around water points.
- **Construction:** Level and grade building sites, and handle materials.
- **Animal handling:** Yes, they even make a calf corral that you can lower over a new calf for protection against aggressive cows.
- **Endless ideas:** Add attachments like grapple buckets, forks, side flow auger buckets and a 3-point adapter plate for more uses. ■