It has been well-documented in popular press and repeatedly confirmed at sale barns and coffee shops that the current calf market is about one-half of where it was just 2 ½ years ago. The short-term projection for both the cattle market and weather are not favorable for ranchers. For ranchers to economically survive the market downturn, they need to get back to the basics, fine-tune their operations and plan for the long-term.

The following is a top 10 list of best management practices and concepts to consider that can help keep you from paying to be in the ranching business and losing money for the next few years.

**Top 10 Ways to Make Cow Herds More Profitable**

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1. **Don’t buy average or inferior bulls.**
   Spending as little as $750 more on a known, better bull could net you an additional $1,475 more per bull, annually. This is accomplished by purchasing a bull that will excel in growth traits that allow the rancher to sell the maximum pounds of weaned calves off the ranch.

2. **Join a cattle marketing alliance.**
   The Integrity Beef Alliance adds a verification program for cattle producers and helps them implement best management practices, improve health status of their cattle by following established health protocols, reduce shrink by requiring the calves to be preconditioned, and sell cattle in larger lots through commingling. Historically, producers in this Alliance have achieved premiums for their cattle above the average of other programs.

3. **Moderate cow size.**
   Larger cows require more forage to sustain themselves on a daily basis. This can affect pasture stocking rates. A cow that is 200 pounds, or 17 percent, larger than another increases forage intake by 11 percent. Thus, stocking rate must be accounted for when moving from a 1,200-pound to a 1,400-pound cow. If you cannot increase the forage production accordingly, you will have to decrease stocking rate by 11 percent fewer cows to still have enough forage for the number of cows in the pasture. The heavier cow should wean a heavier calf, but this increase will not be enough to offset the reduced cow numbers.

4. **Treat your cows as an employee.**
   Your cows should be expected to work daily for you. A productive cow will efficiently deliver a calf to the weaning pen each year, with little cost or problems along the way. In order to do this, you must select the right female then develop her so she will be successful in the environment you expect her to work.

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For more information on cattle management and profitability, visit noble.org/proper-bull-selection, noble.org/integrity-beef-pays-dividends, noble.org/heifer-employee-analogy, and noble.org/take-care-of-your-heifers.
7. Control feed expenses.
Manure scoring is a great way to monitor if a cow is getting enough proper nutrition in almost real-time. It gives the producer an estimation of the digestibility of the diet the cow has been eating for the past 36 to 72 hours. This method allows you to identify nutritional deficiencies before they manifest into lower body condition scores. If you have to feed hay, provide high-enough quality hay that additional feed supplementation is not necessary. At the cow’s highest nutritional requirement, it takes a free-choice diet (28.4 pounds dry matter) of either pasture or hay that is at least 9.9 percent crude protein and 57.6 percent total digestible nutrients (TDN) to meet a 1,200-pound cow’s nutritional requirements during peak lactation (three months post calving). If hay or forage quality is limiting but quantity is not, feed the right supplemental feed at the right time to meet the cow’s requirements most economically.

8. Utilize heterosis.
Heterosis is an often overlooked tool to increase the commercial cattleman’s overall efficiency. Heterosis is an easy tool to implement for most cattlemen and can increase weaning weights and longevity of the cow, improve feedlot performance and produce a more desirable feeder calf.

9. If feeding hay, don’t waste it.
Hay feeding is probably the most expensive form of delivering forage to the cow. If you are locked into this system by the forage type available on your operation, make sure you don’t waste hay by using antiquated-style hay rings. A modified cone hay feeder can save from 8 to 15 percent more hay than the older, typical style feeders.

10. Keep records.
The old saying is true: you can’t manage what you don’t measure. The more records you keep, from how much feed/mineral and hay is fed to weaning weights and percent weaned calves, the more powerful your management decisions can become. Develop key performance indicators (KPI) to benchmark how your operation compares to itself over time and to others of similar size and in the same area annually.

Keep in mind the above referenced best management practices will help most producers survive market- and weather-related disruptions and will allow for more profit year-end and year-out.

5. Cull cows.
First, cull what I call the three O’s: old, open and ornery cows. Then, consider additional culls as the situation warrants. Older cows have a difficult time maintaining weight while weaning an even smaller calf. Carrying an open cow through the winter is analogous to hiring an employee, paying them monthly but not expecting them to show up to work for the next year. Ornery cows damage equipment, injure people and reduce efficiency when they are difficult to work in the pen or take part of the herd to the trees when you come into the pasture.

6. Develop a short and defined breeding season.
Increasing the number of earlier calving cows will increase the average weaning weight in the fall. Consider if a calf is born 30 days earlier in the calving season and gains 2 pounds per day while on the cow, the calf will weigh 60 pounds more at the same weaning date in the fall. That is roughly a 10 to 12 percent increase in weaning weight by simply making sure more calves are born in the first third of the calving season.

* noble.org/guidelines-for-culling-cows
* bit.ly/making-more-with-less