

Teichert's Straight Talk

As the ag industry prepares for a leveling-out on record-high calf prices, longtime ranch manager Burke Teichert shares his playbook for sustainable ranching.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor



Burke Teichert has devoted his life's work to the ranching industry. Born and raised on a family ranch in western Wyoming, his history includes serving as a university faculty member, cattle reproduction specialist and manager of seven cattle ranches for Deseret Land and Cattle. Now retired, he continues to consult and speak on the topic of ranch management, sharing his expertise to help ranches be cost-effective and efficient. He says ranchers have four areas to manage: production, economics/finance, marketing and people.

With regard to the current focus on sustainability, Teichert says, "Sustainable means durable to me, socially responsible, able to last and persist over time."

He adds, "If it's not profitable, it's not sustainable."

As a featured speaker at the Ranch Sustainability Forum in Sheridan, Wyo., in May and hosted by Sheridan College, Padlock Ranch, AgWin Group, First Interstate Bank and the University of Wyoming, Teichert shared his rancher's playbook and offered some straight talk on ranching tactics.

Foremost, Teichert is an advocate of reducing overhead costs as much as possible and says, "You need some overhead, but most people have way too much."

He emphasized that while he has seen a "no input" approach work, he believes in a low-input strategy for a ranch. His mantra is to have a "war on costs" and regularly analyze overheads and gross margin. He adds, "If I can spend \$1 and get \$2 back, I want to, but you need to spend wisely."

To that end, Teichert says one of the top

tactics to lower overhead is to replace "fed feed" with grazed feed.

"Reducing the ratio of fed feed to grazed feed can make a huge economic difference," Teichert notes. "With some ingenuity, you can figure out how to reduce feed costs."

One strategy he has employed is to skip days of winter feeding so cows are inclined to graze some on the open range; otherwise, he says, "With daily feeding cows tend to wait for the feed truck."

Consider cattle traits

Teichert also emphasizes giving careful consideration to the kind of cattle selected for the ranch. His advice: Pick the toughest time of year you've got on your ranch, then select cows for that.

"Do you have to feed them to keep them in condition?" he asks. "If so, do you want their heifer calves?"

Additionally, he says, "Bulls never gestate or lactate, so if you have to feed them, do you want their daughters?"

Teichert prefers cattle with a small to moderate mature size, and moderate milking ability.

"Most environments are not lush for long, so producers need cows to get through that," he says. "There's no room to argue milking ability. Anything beyond adequate milk is an expensive deal."

Teichert's bottom line: "I want a cow to reproduce and particularly rebreed. No trait is more important than rebreeding," he says.

Along with the genetic selection consideration, Teichert advocates taking an approach that is both integrative and holistic — for the entire ranch.

"There's never just a single output," Teichert says. "A systems approach to decision making enables a producer to see and consider unintended consequences."

To illustrate this, Teichert points out high-growth-rate bulls can eventually result in bigger cows; high-milking-ability cows may equate to less efficiency and a poor feed conversion, meaning a cow must eat more all year.

"Producers need to think all the way through their decisions and have careful coordination of reproduction, genetics, grazing and marketing, and understand when you change one thing, it impacts the rest," Teichert emphasizes.

More strategies

Other advice Teichert shares include:

- ▶ *Develop and use good planning and decision-making tools.* "Ranchers must have good financial records and good production records," says Teichert, who prefers to separate direct and overhead costs, and enterprise accounting by cost category. Among the categories he likes to evaluate are weaned calf crop percent, pregnancy rates, weaning weight and yearling gain, and death loss by class of cattle.
- ▶ *Have a drought plan and a snow plan.* That said, don't operate every year as if it's going to be a tough one, he stresses. "Have a contingency plan and implement it when needed, but so many economic opportunities can be missed if you operate like every year is going to be bad."
- ▶ *Sell the hay equipment.* "If you buy hay,



you increase your carrying capacity, and you won't have the urge to put hay up yourself if you don't have the equipment," Teichert says.

- ▶ *Put minimal inputs into the development of replacement heifers.* He allowed a short exposure for breeding (21-24 days) and says, "Those that get bred make a better cow and wean a better calf in the long run, and the opens make good feeders."
- ▶ *For the cow herd, Teichert suggests managing cows for a short calving season and a long breeding season.* He would leave bulls in with the cows until preg-check time. He reports that it made a better cow herd, often with just a 30-day calving season, and he found a market for the late calvers and opens.
- ▶ *Along with that, he advises developing the self-discipline to cull.* "Be attuned to that every day, especially from a commercial perspective. Opens, dry cows, wild ones,

those that wean a poor calf or require help or extra work; have a list and then wait until the market is right," says Teichert. "You won't make huge genetic progress, but you will improve the efficiency and economics in the herd."

- ▶ *Take advantage of heterosis.* Mother Nature doesn't give many freebies, but heterosis comes close, says Teichert.
- ▶ *Calve in synch with nature* — which is later than most people calve, notes Teichert. That said, he emphasizes that each operation has to look at your own environment and situation to determine what that best calving time is.
- ▶ *Place an emphasis on marketing* and marry the production plan with the marketing plan.
- ▶ *Implement low-stress animal-handling techniques.* "You can never get too good," Teichert says. "The way you graze, and the way you handle animals will both make you money."

- ▶ *Use mindless time for strategic planning.*
- ▶ *When you do make a profit, invest it back in the ranch and invest in education.* "Be a lifelong learner," Teichert says.
- ▶ *Managers should strive to create an environment in which people want to excel and then provide the tools, training and freedom for employees to do so.* "Be respectful of every idea from your team. You don't have to agree with it, but you must be open to discuss and evaluate it," says Teichert.
- ▶ *Consider operating with a high cows-per-person ratio* — each employee is responsible for his or her own herd or herds; large herds also facilitate grazing management, and it's easier to check 800 cows in one herd than 8 herds of 100 each, Teichert says.
- ▶ *Additionally, Teichert says you can then do accounting and inventory by herd,* which allows employees to know their performance — and co-workers do, as well. The result, Teichert says, is that "bad apples," those who aren't very good, typically leave. Also, with information and feedback, people start to ask each other, "How do you do that?" because they want to do better.
- ▶ *Strive for continuous improvement of the key resources: land, livestock and people.* Teichert emphasizes that this requires being adaptive and realizing that each situation is different.

Grazing lessons

Grazing is one area that Burke Teichert says requires continuous tweaking on a ranch. He prefers a system that he calls, "planned, adaptive, time-control grazing." He says, "I can never go back to continuous grazing knowing what would happen to soil and productivity."

He advocates short-duration grazing with a lengthy recovery, and says, "I used to think twice or three times overgrazing was ok. Now I prefer one year or more for recovery." He also advises against grazing an area at the same time two years in a row.

With irrigation, he says you can regraze an area in 28-45 days. Why?

"You can predict the next rainfall," says Teichert.

Bottom line, with grazing on any operation he has found there is a learning curve for both producers and animals. If you push the stocking rate too hard, land and animal performance can dip.

Editor's Note: Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.

