

The Business Of Farming: Animal Husbandry

It is not the situation but what you do about it that determines the future

By S. D. Parsons

There have been several items in the Farmer of late that maintain cattle production in Zimbabwe is not profitable. Undoubtedly prevailing high interest rates and inflation impinge on profits, but the cause may lie deeper than the current malaise.

In my last article I mentioned two 'red flags' that I associate with cattle production viz., calving out of season and the small herds commonly associated with single sire bulling and other 'good' animal husbandry practices. Over many years of working with livestock producers on four continents I have developed a checklist for determining profitable production strategies. This is a vast subject but perhaps even the briefest of comments on each may give interested producers food for thought.

I believe the key issues in ensuring that livestock production is profitable are:

- Selecting the right market for the livestock enterprise.
- Fit the animal to the environment.
- Fit the production year to the season.
- Ensure that the six Wiltbank reproduction principles are satisfied.
- Ensure that there are strategies in place to fit stocking rates to feed available.
- Minimise purchased feed requirements through sound grazing management.
- Supplement to offset deficiencies in forage quality, not feed quantity.
- Ensure production is not limited by poor herd health.

1. *Select the right market for the livestock enterprise*

There is a great deal of talk about producing beef for the overseas market. We are all tempted by good prices for our product, but in the same way that maximum yields do not necessarily mean high profit, high prices frequently require high inputs. Gross income may look attractive but does net income follow suit?

For instance I am of the opinion that the American feedlot industry as we know it today is a passing phenomenon. Created half a century ago to use up surplus grain the result of government price guarantees, and major production breakthroughs – hybrid grain varieties, nitrogenous fertilisers and tractors that replaced horses, it is an enormously inefficient use of resources. It survives today not because it is highly profitable to feed beef but because feedlot operators are really in the business of speculating on grain which they sell through livestock.

2. *Match the breed to the environment*

Unfortunately too many ranchers tend to identify a specific breed as being the "best" breed, and then attempt to force that breed to fit every environment. It can be done, but usually at enormous economic cost. Each breed has production and carcass attributes specific to themselves. Our job is to find the breed or combination of crosses, which best fit our physical environment and the particular market niche we have chosen. The choice of breed, or crossbreeding programme, and market niche go hand in hand. They cannot be decided on independently if the business is to be economically viable and successful.

3. *Fit the production year to the season.*

As I mentioned in my previous article selecting a calving season which fits natural fodder flow has an enormous impact on the economics of livestock production.

4. *Ensure that the six Wiltbank reproduction principles are satisfied.*

The benchmark conception rate for my US clients is between 90 and 95 percent. Below that figure we are carrying too many passengers with the result that the main ranch product is cull cows. Ironically too high a conception rate is also a red flag and demands investigation of feed costs. As the title suggests there are six key factors that determine reproductive efficiency. Of these the single most important is cow condition at calving.

5. *Overfed and undernourished*

An army marches on its stomach and livestock production succeeds or fails depending how it is nourished. One of the two biggest overhead costs on livestock properties is land, yet despite this substantial investment in grass most ranchers use it inefficiently. Instead we buy expensive feed in the forlorn hope of making a bad situation better. Feeding the wrong feed at the wrong time is part of the problem and not part of the solution. A basic understanding of whether to supplement the microbes in the rumen or the animal directly is fundamental to successful ruminant production. As much as I'd like to discuss this vital subject in depth space precludes. Future articles will be devoted to grazing and drought management.

In my next article I will explore the much-neglected field of veld management.

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