

Stocker Cattle Tips

#1) Know your cost of production

You can't determine if and when you have made an acceptable profit if you don't know what it costs you to produce a feeder steer. Additionally, cost of production is critical for evaluating cattle purchases next year. Call an agricultural economist at the Foundation for advice on how to gather this data.

#2) Use implants

Growth-promoting implants are the single biggest "bang for the buck" you get in stocker production. A \$0.75 implant can increase gain per head by 15 to 20 lbs. If the value of those 20 lbs. is \$10, you get roughly 2,665% (annualized) return on your money. That sure beats owning Enron or WorldCom.

#3) Establish a profit objective

Before you buy the cattle, determine how much profit per head you would be happy with. Figure that into your budget. Keep an eye on the cattle market, but more importantly, watch the futures and options markets. Evaluate forward contracts with feedyards or buyers. If, during the grazing season, the opportunity to capture that profit comes along, you had better pay attention because it might not be there again.

#4) Have an alternative feed source

Being able to buy cattle when no one has pasture, or being able to keep your cattle gaining through tough pasture conditions, can add tremendous flexibility to your operation. Being able to handle byproduct feeds such as soybean hulls or wheat midds can significantly reduce the cost of supplemental feed.

#5) Have a good health management program

A health management program should be a written plan, designed by you and your veterinarian, for how you are going to care for your cattle. It should include identification, a vaccination program, diagnosis procedures, treatment protocols and morbidity/mortality targets.

#6) Produce early pasture

If you are certain you will graze out small grains, strive to produce forage as early in the fall as you can. This can extend the fall/winter grazing season and reduce the need for supplemental feed. Contact Noble Foundation soil fertility and crops specialists and forage specialists for pasture establishment recommendations.

#7) Evaluate marketing alternatives

Learn to evaluate all possible marketing alternatives well before the end of the grazing season. These include local sale barns, large regional sale barns, video/internet sales or private treaty ("country") sales. Also, you can "delay" marketing by retaining ownership into the feedlot.

#8) Manage shrink

Reducing stress on cattle is key to reducing shrink. Allow cattle to fill up on pasture first thing in the morning, and load them after they have grazed. Train your cattle to

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easy to catch by feeding them for a couple of weeks before marketing. Don't catch them until the trucks show up. (I have seen cattle sit in the pens for two hours waiting on trucks.) If your cattle are used to eating from a bunk, ensure that the cattle are fed at the sale barn, even if you have to feed them yourself. Check with the sale barn manager about their ability to feed.

#9) Feed an ionophore

Ionophores, such as Rumensin or Bovatec, can increase ADG by 0.1-0.2 lb/day. They can be fed in supplements or in mineral. Evidence is mounting that Rumensin is probably more effective than other ionophores in promoting gain and reducing the severity of bloat (Horn et al., Proceedings of 2002 Wheatland Stocker Conference). Don't let horses have access to any feed or mineral containing Rumensin.

#10) Anticipate muddy or icy conditions

Cattle can do tremendous damage to muddy or frozen wheat/rye pasture by trampling it. Heavy mud can reduce average daily gain (ADG) by as much as 1 lb/day. Anticipate these events and put cattle into a sacrifice area with hay for a few days. To minimize bloat, make sure cattle are full before you turn them back out on small grain pasture. Remember that electric fence has one big downfall — heavy ice.