



GRASS & STRESS

For many, the idea of raising Longhorns is pretty nostalgic. If you look at the varied backgrounds of people in the breed, you'll find some who have grown up in ag families involved in dairy or beef cattle, horses, crop farming, as well as the opposite end of the spectrum including folks who have never owned any livestock before, grew up in an urban setting, and whose friends would have never guessed that they'd own cows. I think it goes without saying that it is the magnificence these animals possess that draws us to them. They are the perfect cattle for many reasons, such as easy keeping, easy calving, and smart just to name a few. And while many people spend obsessive hours looking at pedigrees, attending events, and gaining as much breeding knowledge as possible, there are still those who miss a very important aspect of the whole realm that is your Longhorn business – pasture management.

If you've been in the Longhorn business more than five minutes, you understand that there is a large and long-term investment with very little return in the short-term. Fencing, pasture, trucks, trailers, something to feed with, and more need to be considered. Through my business, Eastwind StockCo Consulting, I currently work with 15 programs, and one of the first goals most people have is to be a breeder. That's a 3-6 year plan. Minimizing that overall investment and the time it takes to get a return on your investment can make a huge difference in one's ability and desire to stay involved. It's easy to be in the Longhorn business when you're making money. Minimizing steps and decreasing "do-overs" is a way to keep both investments smaller and profit quicker.

If you haven't already experienced a new first time buyer, you'll love it. The excitement they bring is infectious and many times you'll get questions that begin with "Well I don't want to sound dumb" or "I don't want to ask a stupid question" to which I reply "I promise you,

any thought you had isn't one that hasn't already been had before." Each person in the industry has been a new breeder. We've all had that first day, that first time. I love showing off our ranch to new folks. My goal is to be as humble and as approachable as possible so that they feel like they can ask any questions that are running through their mind. I try to do more listening than talking, but one of the first questions I ask is, "Are you set up for cattle?"

You'd be surprised at the responses. Many just assume since they have a pasture and Longhorns are low maintenance that it makes sense to get a few and turn them out. To me that's like you and your spouse planning to have a child because you have an extra bedroom. Immediately I start throwing some questions at them.

- **How are you going to catch these cattle if need be?**
- **Once they're caught and you need them to have some vet work done, what then?**
- **Do you know your stocking rates?**
- **How do you plan to feed your cattle this winter?**

Many don't look that far ahead or have what I call a "Planned Husbandry Budget", and it catches them by surprise. You aren't going to build a house and plan to put a bathroom in later are you? Why buy cattle without any type of infrastructure plan? The reality of being a Longhorn breeder is that along with the many hats we wear, two of the most important are that of Grass Farmer and Animal Stress Manager.

1) How are you going to catch these cattle?

This is my number one priority when working with new folks. I want to know what their plan is to catch their herd if they need to. Is a fence down? Is there a sick cow? Did they sell one and need to transport it

FARMERS MANAGERS

now? Very few people can pasture load. You need some type of catch pen. The simplest and most cost effective way is portable panels. They're sturdy and can be fastened tight by putting in metal or wooden posts or driving T-posts and tying them fast. They don't require any special skills or experience to assemble and are easy to handle without any equipment. We use these on our lease places because it allows us to break them down and move them when necessary.

For new breeders, if you don't like the system you put together you can easily add on to it or redesign it. Once you're happy with your design, looking towards more permanent designs with either pipe or wood is certainly suggested. You can still keep those panels around, as you can never have too many of them.

Note: This is where many beginning breeders waste time and money. Many times their catch pens are built

too small and in a way that's not conducive to cattle movement. I've seen it time and again where people's thoughts are to start out small and have to tear down to rebuild it or make it larger. Plan your working system to be double the size you need. It's a lot easier to work cattle down from larger to smaller catch pens than try to force a herd into a small catch pen.

It's a stepping process. Take cattle into a smaller pasture, then smaller and smaller and smaller until you're able to control them. We have seven pens beginning with 2 acres, then 1 acre, then smaller and smaller until they're in a squeeze chute where we can cut cattle out and have confident control of them.

The other aspect is understanding how cattle move. Put gates in corners, try not to make cattle turn when loading onto trailers, and try to eliminate corners in working pens as cattle bind up there. Corners are usu-



Portable panels may be used to make economical and easy to move catch pens.

ally the first place a nervous cow will try to escape. My best advice would be to take special trips to go look at real working systems that have proven to work consistently and confidently for their owners.

Feeding and watering your cattle in your catch pens on a regular basis is a very simple way to make catching them easy. They are creatures of habit; you create that habit. They see that pen as a place for food and water. If you only put them in that catch pen when you need to work them, they'll see that as a place of stress. A feed bucket and a holler is much less stressful than running them up a fence line in hopes you can push them through a gate with a horse or ATV. This is why a large catch pen that allows even the low cows on the totem pole access to feed without getting beat on is important.

Create their habits. We rotational graze our cattle. They're use to moving through gates following our feed bag every few days. When it's time to catch them in our working pens it's just another gate to them. If we never ran them through any gates it would look suspicious when we would move them to the pens, much like your dog when he's taken to the vet.



Even grazing leads to healthier pastures and less money spent on hay through the year.

2) Do you have proper handling facilities?

While there is a list of must haves, some type of cattle handling facility is one of the tops. There is no fear worse than having a sick animal and no way of catching and restraining them. There are people who have tried chasing their cattle down with trucks and roping them in hopes of being able to vet cattle. Invest in some type of squeeze chute and alleyway in which you can stack cattle to work off of your catch pen. Your vet will thank you and you'll have one of the biggest peace of mind moments.

But this is generally where the "do-overs" happen. There are times when folks try to cut corners and get by

with as little as possible by investing in a cheaper chute system and smaller pens. Why make double the work for you, losing time and money? Buy a good chute you can use for years. We have a Gross Chute. It was there when my father ran G & G back in the 90's and it's about to make it into the 2020's. So we're talking 20+ years. While asking on social media platforms and peers is a quick way, it's not always the best. Many people only have experience with the one they've used. If you don't know which one you like, head to a ranch that has one and work cattle through them. Get a feel for what you like and try multiple kinds and see how their flow system works, where cattle bind up at and where they lose productivity and gain stress on the cattle. It's better to invest in a \$5,000 chute system now than invest in a \$2,500 chute system now only to reinvest in a \$5,000 system a couple years later. Save yourself time and money.

3) Do you know your stocking rates?

Why is this important? We are grass farmers. What I mean is, we raise feed for cattle, mainly grass. If we are buying hay and mixed feed, we are costing ourselves a high percentage of our profit. Do you know what it costs you to take care of one cow per year? We do an audit every year, it cost us \$.67/cow in 2017. We could even break it down per our main herd, heifer herd, weanling pasture, recip pasture, and bulls. We track how many days a cow runs on grass to get our stocking rates. Right now we're running 800 lbs of cow/acre. Meaning a 1,000 lb. cow can run on about 1.2 acres for \$.67/a day. Most of the local ranchers around us are running about 400 lbs. of cow/acre. So what are we doing different?

We are very strict on our rotational grazing. Instead of having one huge pasture we have it broken down into many little pastures and we rotate them every few days (See chart on pg. 18). There is a ton of science behind this, but in essence it is like cutting your lawn. Cows come through quick and take a couple bites and move on. The grass doesn't get eaten too low. It stimulates the root and the grass grows quicker and stronger. There are positive side affects too. The manure gets spread out, the fly problems become less, you put good organic matter back into the ground slowly, and you get a good grass bed that helps fight weeds.

The downside to grazing too long or allowing cows to eat too much is they'll continue to eat the spots in which they've already eaten where the grass is more tender. What you get is an uneven graze. You'll have tall

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areas that the cows won't touch and will need mowed, wasting gas, wear and tear, and time mowing. We are currently working on breaking our pastures down even more with cross fencing. Our ultimate goal is to get our stocking rates to 1600lbs/acre, or roughly a 1.5 cows/acre. *(Forage quality and type may vary greatly by geographic region creating a wide range of stocking rates.)*

We quit making hay all together and turned our hay fields into pasture. You can buy 800 lb+ rolls of hay in Virginia for about \$25/bale. With all our equipment, and time it took for us to make the hay we needed, it was costing me about \$51/bale to make. It doesn't take a genius to figure that out. Ben Gravett always said, "If you aren't making money you're losing money." It also gave us more pasture to graze, thus cutting back the time frame on how early we were going to need to feed hay. Typically, in the years of hay making, we'd start feeding cattle in November and continue until mid April. Roughly about 400 bales of hay. In 2016, when we started our pasture rotation about


midway through the year on our new ranch, we started feeding hay in the beginning of December by rolling it out. We put our main herd on an 8-acre dry lot, and our Cherry Hill herd on a 4-acre dry lot, which we ran from November 22, 2016 to March 27th, 2017. We fed 278.5 bales. That's much less than the normal 400 bales we fed in the years before. We ended up turning the cattle out on grass on April 3, 2017 and started our spring rotations until June, when we turned them onto summer schedules. We didn't have to pull cattle off our rotational grazing until January 1, 2018. In one year, our rotational

grazing increased the grazing 39 days, that's 39 days I wasn't feeding hay.

In the 2017-2018 winter we didn't start feeding hay until January 1 and then because we had an unbelievably cold two weeks, the coldest on record since 1961. We fed hay until April 12th. We had a really cold early spring with really low ground temperatures that hurt our grass growth out of the gate. We continued to roll out the hay on the dry lots (8 acres for the main herd and 4 acres for the Cherry Hill pasture to which we also planted rye in August). Our hay consumption dropped

from 278.5 bales in 2016-2017 winter to 163.5 bales in 2017-2018 winter. Our biggest change to our hay feeding this past year was the way in which we rolled out the hay. Much like someone would strip graze a pasture, we rolled out our hay like that so that the cattle weren't tracking up all the pasture while eating and had time to clean it up. We roll out in one spot one day, the next day we'd roll next to it, and again and again. Eventually coming back to that first spot months later. We evened out our footprint on the pasture.

Our number one goal in cattle management is to

increase feed and decrease stress. The feed will have an everlasting effect on the herd health that obviously impacts body condition, horn growth, and fertility. The stress of the cattle, whether from being under conditioned or working facility caused, will also effect the horn growth and fertility of your cattle. These just snowball into profit loss both as a beef animal and seed stock opportunity. Improve your grass farming and stress management. It will pay dividends both in your marketing efforts and also in your peace of mind. 

	PASTURE A	PASTURE B	PASTURE C	PASTURE D	PASTURE E
4/14/18	39				
4/15/18	39				
4/16/18		39			
4/17/18			39		
4/18/18			39		
4/19/18		3		39	
4/20/18		42			
4/21/18				42	
4/22/18				42	
4/23/18					43
4/24/18					43
4/25/18	43				
4/26/18	37				
4/27/18		37			

Sample pasture rotation records showing the day by day record of what number of cattle were in which pasture. Note the consistent, frequent movement of cattle from section to section. The process works with herds of all sizes.

Don't forget...

The TLBAA Membership year is from July 1 to June 30th.

If you did not receive a renewal letter from us, please contact the office to verify your address.



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