

The Cost of Change or Not Changing
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Readers of this article likely read popular press articles or attend educational meetings where Dr. Gary Bates, Dr. Justin Rhinehart, Dr. Lew Strickland, or others introduce new ideas and practices that could benefit cattle producers. None of the three specialists specifically named write those articles or conduct those meetings to hear themselves talk. All three educators truly want to see beef cattle producers improve production efficiencies, profitability, and become better stewards of available resources. They know helping improve a person's operation will help improve the beef cattle herd across the state which is one of their goals.

These specialists have devoted their careers to help improve the career of others. So, why are producers so slow to adopt, or why do producers never adopt some of the practices that are supported by sound research? There are likely a number of reasons. Reasons may include not having the resources, not being aware of the economic benefit, not having a complete understanding of the process, or a plethora of other reasons. However, the two primary reasons producers do not change is because it usually cost something to make a change and most of us do not like change!

Some people have a routine and change to that routine can be tough for some people. (I am talking to myself.) However, sometimes changes must be made and many times it is beneficial to make changes. Many folks in the cattle business continue to do things the way their father and grandfather did them. A common saying is, "That is how Dad and Grandad did it" or something to that effect.

Many grandfathers harvested hay and tilled ground with mules, milked one cow, collected eggs from 7 hens, fed 3 hogs, ate meals cooked on a wood burning stove, and showered once a week whether they needed it or not. Many of these practices were appropriate in those days, but technology has advanced. Many practices of old are obsolete, because they can be done more efficiently and cost effectively than 50 to 100 years ago.

When producers face the opportunity for change, the first question often asked is "how much is it going to cost." Alternatively, the question that ought to be asked is "how much is it going to cost if the change is not made", or "does this change make the operation more profitable and sustainable!"

Dr. Bates has been successful in educating producers about soil tests, forage tests, and including clovers in fescue pasture. However, there are still producers who do not do these things. Additionally, Dr. Bates has spent time educating producers about warm season grasses and how having a small portion of an operations pasture in warm season grass can benefit the operation during summer months. He has had some success in helping producers improve in this area, but there are still many producers who are not adopting this practice.

Similarly, Dr. Rhinehart has educated producers about the importance of pregnancy checking cows and many of the artificial insemination technologies that commercial cow-calf producers can efficiently utilize. He has had success in educating several producers, but he is also aware there are many more producers who are slow to accept the technologies. It is one thing to choose natural service over artificial insemination, but it is another to not pregnancy check cows after the breeding season. The cost of carrying one open cow for six months in a herd of 30 cows can easily exceed the cost of pregnancy checking those cows.

Not to be outdone, Dr. Strickland has spent a lot of educational time talking about herd health. One aspect he has spent a lot of time on is testing cattle for BVD-PI. There is no doubt more cattle in the state have been tested because his program, but adoption is slow. The test is free and all it cost is the time to take an ear notch or drawl blood. Why would producers not be taking advantage of a test that is free and could provide them with valuable information?

The take home message is that producers must do more than be aware of new practices discussed by specialists in the cattle industry. Producers should actively think how those practices could be implemented on their farm, and then they should put pen to paper to determine if a change could benefit their bottom line. Producers should ask the question, "How much will it cost if a practice is not implemented?" This question should be asked because it appears several dollars are being left on the table by producers because of complacency and unwillingness to change. There is nothing wrong with maximizing profits.