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**When it is Worth Getting Help on the Cattle Operation**

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**Effectiveness and Efficiency**

Many farms in Mississippi are operated by just one person. According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, 63.8% of farm operators in Mississippi in 2007 were sole operators on their farms. Only 1.2% of farm operations in the state reported greater than three operators on a single farm.

Sole operators typically perform a wide range of functions on the farm and essentially become a jack of all trades in terms of farming operations. This requires them to be knowledgeable about these various aspects of the operation and capable of effectively performing needed management practices. But just being effective in conducting these management practices is not necessarily going to lead to profitable management practice implementation. Efficiency also comes into play.

Effectiveness is getting the job completed to desired specifications, i.e., doing the right things. Efficiency involves doing the job in a manner that optimizes resource use, i.e., doing things in the right way. For example, a cattle producer may be able to effectively erect a fence without any additional help, but doing so without help may be inefficient in terms of the time that it takes to get it done. Task effectiveness can also be compromised in cases where the person doing a solo project is not the most qualified person to do that particular job. In addition, prolonged task time takes labor time away from other activities and may lead to some management tasks to be postponed or even foregone if the lone operator intends to do them all as a “one-man show”.

**Jobs Best Done with Help**

Some jobs are better accomplished with extra hands to assist than as solo efforts. The total time that two people take to build a fence together may easily be less than half of the time that it takes for one person to do it alone. This is because of synergies in working together. With synergy, the interaction of multiple people working as a team produces a result that is different than the sum of their individual efforts working alone.

Cattle handling is an example of a common management practice that is generally best done by multiple people at once. Having adequate trained handlers on hand to conduct cattle handling activities can greatly increase the efficiency of this essential management practice. Processing cattle in a timely manner leads to benefits such as less stress on the animals being handled. More cattle may be able to be processed in a single working session and reduce the need for extra working sessions. Efficiency is lost each time one has to start an activity from scratch again, even if it is just in the duplication of travel, set-up, or clean-up time. Having additional qualified persons on site during cattle handling is also wise from the standpoint of having support available in the event that a handler is injured and needs immediate assistance.

Tasks that require more brute strength than one person can muster may be better performed by multiple persons or using tools that make it feasible for one person to do them well. One person may run into a situation in which he or she tries but cannot alone physically pull a calf in an assisted delivery. Getting help from another person and/or a mechanical device may be prudent in order to save the calf and its dam from a difficult birth in process.

There are instances on cattle operations when producers find themselves wanting for another pair of hands to hold something in place or pass something to them while they do a “two-man” job. Certain aspects of assembling or repairing equipment may sometimes seem impossible for one person to do alone. Again, having the proper tools to do the job and extra help when needed can greatly improve the efficiency of accomplishing these types of tasks. It may be the case that the extra help is only needed briefly to avoid a bottleneck of wasted time and effort trying to do something that is very difficult to finish without help.

It is not uncommon for people to no longer be able to do something adequately that they once did well. This can happen suddenly or over time for a variety of reasons. It is constructive to ask for help to get difficult things done that were once easily done without assistance. Everyone should know their limitations and when their insistence on doing something potentially compromises work effectiveness, efficiency, or the safety of others in the same work environment.

### **Specialization of Effort**

There are a number of situations in which additional labor is worth incurring added expense. Activities that are best done by someone with specialized skills or advanced experience may be better hired out than done by an operator without this expertise. Some people are great welders, others are proficient in artificial insemination, some can do both tasks well, and others are not very good at either one. Cattle operators should know what they do well now, what they may do well in the future with additional experience, and what they just need to put on the permanent list for having someone else brought in to do.

### **Too Much Help**

More is not always better. Although bringing in extra help to work on the farm is often warranted, there are certainly limits to the amount of help that improves productivity or efficiency. While the synergy from teamwork improves efficiency, at some point, adding extra workers actually takes away from efficiency.

When all the major components of a particular activity are covered by workers, then adding extra workers results in those workers standing around idle or, worse, getting in the way of the productive workers. If these workers are on the payroll, then money is wasted in unnecessary wages. At the very least, the time of those people not being highly productive is wasted.

Know the ideal number of laborers for a certain task. The appropriate number of workers can be limited by working space, quantity of available tools, or the nature of the task.

Think about having too many people in a cattle handling facility. Workers may be crowded and bump into one another, and cattle and engaged workers may be unnecessarily distracted by these onlookers. Either do not add workers beyond the ideal number, or commit those excess laborers to doing a separate task.

### **Solo Jobs**

Some jobs on the farm may not really need more than one person assigned to them. For instance, one person can check cattle in pastures while others are busy with separate things. This is more efficient than a group outing to check cattle that, although it may be great social time, is putting other aspects of farm management in jeopardy of not getting done on time. Training an employee on how to properly check cows or perform some other task is a different matter though. It may be a good use of a manager's time to work alongside a new worker at first before turning that person loose to do things alone.

### **The Cost of Help**

Obtaining help in performing tasks on a cattle operation typically comes at added costs. Labor is generally not free. It must be compensated. Labor can be hired for wages, or labor may volunteer to help as a gesture of goodwill, just being neighborly as is common in the South. Goodwill labor may be intermittent and not always available on call because of scheduling conflicts. But, preplanned arrangements in which cattle producers in a community work together to jointly perform management tasks on each other's operations, such as cattle handling, can be very useful to all parties involved.

Hiring a full time laborer on a cattle operation may not be economically justified for a small-scale operation. It may instead be reasonable to hire intermittent labor for short periods of time or single events. Labor intensive times on cattle operations include hay harvesting, winter feeding, artificial insemination breeding, calving, and calf weaning. Plan out a management calendar for the operation to identify labor demands and make arrangements for acquiring labor when needed. Good help can be hard to find, so advance planning is prudent.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service or visit [msucares.com/livestock/beef](https://msucares.com/livestock/beef).