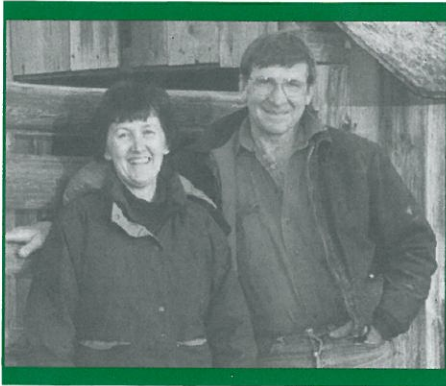


9 Things to Stop Doing

by Wayne Burluson

In 1995 the Quirk Cattle Company, a century-old family ranch near Eureka, Montana, was concerned about the future. The owners, Faye and Leland Driggs, strived each day to take good care of their 300 cows on the 3,000-acre (1,200-ha) ranch.

However, there was a problem. Daily chores were becoming more than they could handle. Operating costs kept rising, and the only solution seemed to be to improve production. They had alfalfa to plant, cut, bale, and haul; calves to pull, tag, and wean; cows to feed and pregnancy-test; fields to irrigate; equipment to maintain; and more.



Faye and Leland Driggs stopped doing some of their chores and changed their Montana ranch from one of daily drudgery to a highly efficient cattle operation.

daily decisions. They learned about a holistic way to operate their ranch, basic grassland ecology, and land monitoring. They observed 1,200 animals move through a round wagon-wheel watering system to the sound of a whistle.

The Driggs went home and started questioning. They discussed the real purpose of their ranch and set goals for quality of life.

They put down in writing what they wanted their ranch to become: "We want a sustainable, profitable, family ranch. We want to enjoy our daily work with time off to get away, knowing the ranch is secure. We want our ranch to be peaceful. We want improved land, better soils, and healthier plants and livestock."

Then with these goals in mind, they made a "To Do" list. Only this time it became a "Stop To Do" list. It contained these items:

1. Stop using fuel guzzlers

The Driggs sold their heavy equipment for farming and haying. Now they buy their grain and hay from full-time growers. "It doesn't pay to own equipment for part-time use," says Leland. "The only fuel we use now is for a 1-ton feed truck, pickup, car, and four-wheeler."

2. Stop haying

The Driggs experimented with not haying for a few years and kept accurate financial records of all their expenses. They made a decision to buy quality hay from a neighbor and let him haul the hay to their place for winter feeding. The hidden benefit is that a portion of the neighbor's energy (organic matter) and busy work (fertilizers, repairs, and so on) went into the Driggs' soil, lowering the need to replant and fertilize their hay fields.

3. Stop fertilizing hay fields

Instead of commercial fertilizer, the Driggs now use manure from grazing cattle. And the livestock recycle forage back into the soils by stepping on it, increasing soil fertility.

Stressed to the Max

They were stressed and even thought of selling the ranch. Finally, they got some inspiring advice at a hands-on grazing workshop. There they met Don and Cleo Shaules. The Shaules family calve a 680-cow herd plus 280 replacement heifers, do most chores by themselves, and still smile at the end of the day.

At the workshop the Driggs were introduced to a new way of making

4. Stop pulling calves

The Driggs switched from conventional bulls to Barzona bulls (www.barzona.com), known for lighter calf weights. Now they no longer have to get up at night to assist laboring cows.

5. Stop winter and early spring calving

Over several years the Driggs moved their calving dates later in the season to avoid cold-weather calving. Now they calve in June on green grass. This gives the family more time for winter vacations. It is much less work, which is especially a benefit on cold nights.

For example, even with Montana's current droughty conditions, the ranch calved 284 calves from a herd of 287 cows last year. This was all done without watching the cows or heifers calve-out.

6. Stop irrigating by hand

Instead of moving irrigation equipment by hand, Leland found a small gasoline-powered, self-propelled ditch crawler that drags irrigation dams down a level ditch. This now self-irrigates his 300 acres of hay meadows.

7. Stop weaning calves in the fall

When the Driggs stopped weaning calves in the fall, they reduced their workload by only having one herd to feed through the winter instead of two. This resulted in 100 more pounds of beef per calf and much less work with the same amount of hay.

8. Stop leasing public lands

This idea saved the Driggs both headaches and money. It stopped the stressful phone calls about their livestock on open rangeland and placed another \$30,000 in total yearly expenses back into their pockets. It also gave them more quality time to take better care of their home ranch.

9. Stop chasing livestock

The Driggs built a labor-saving grazing cell — a round doughnut-shape corral system with gates designed to let livestock move themselves to different pastures. You close the currently used water access gate, open a new side gate into the adjacent ungrazed pasture, and then open that pasture's water access gate. The livestock must move into the ungrazed pasture to drink.

Saying no to old habits is hard. Leland has to force himself to walk past the swather when the alfalfa starts to bloom. Faye misses that great smell of fresh-cut hay. But they now enjoy a more profitable ranch that is less work and more manageable to operate. They are making better decisions. ↴

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The Driggs family now grazes their hay fields, using the cattle for fertilizer instead of making hay and buying commercial fertilizer.