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## The Nebraska Ranch Practicum

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# Cornhusker Economics

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## The Nebraska Ranch Practicum

The Nebraska Ranch Practicum is a multi-disciplinary, hands-on educational program designed to give participants the skills and education needed to succeed in today's ranching industry. The Practicum was established in 1999 as a "three-season" program designed to integrate information producers encounter throughout the beef production year into a framework for decision making. The Practicum seeks to improve decision-making skills, enhance stewardship of natural resources, improve skills critical for evaluation of ranching enterprises, and enhance ranch sustainability.

Camaraderie and exchange of ideas among participants, instructors and facilitators are among the most valued aspects of the Practicum. Sessions take place over eight days stretching from early June into early January. Six of the eight days are in three two-day sessions with one taking place in June, one in September and one in January. In July and November, meetings are one-day sessions. Each session is conducted via team teaching with instructors from multiple disciplines interacting with participants throughout the session on a variety of interrelated topics. Instructors and facilitators include University of Nebraska-Lincoln faculty from animal science, agronomy, range science, agricultural economics, and veterinary medicine. In addition, instructors leverage the experiences and expertise of the Practicum participants in small group discussions to increase the exchange of ideas and experiences among the participants.

The Nebraska Ranch Practicum curriculum emphasizes a systems approach to ranching. Natural resource management, livestock management and economics are integrated throughout the Practicum. Students are exposed to concepts both in the classroom and in the field with six of the eight days taking place at the University of Nebraska's Gudmundsen Sandhills Laboratory (GSL) located near Whitman, Nebraska in the heart of the Sandhills. Students get hands-on field experience monitoring range conditions, animal body condition, diet nutrient content, wildlife habitat, and overall production conditions.

More importantly, Practicum participants get hands-on instruction and experiences turning information into decisions that lead to sustained profitability. Examples include tracking feed inventory and making feed resource management decisions throughout the production season. Participants learn to formulate grazing strategies to accomplish natural resource management, livestock production and financial objectives, including management strategies that mitigate the impacts of drought.

On the first day of the Practicum, students are introduced to the principles of systems thinking and good decision making. This includes practice using a decision-making process. Throughout the Practicum, students are immersed in ranch management decision-making, both tactical and strategic. This includes learning how to manage market risk with tools such as LRP insurance, forwarding contracting, retained ownership, options and

hedging, as well as alternative cull cow marketing systems. The economics of herd replacement methods, buying versus raising replacement heifers, are discussed along with the effect that decision can have on other areas of the operation. Deciding on calving and weaning dates that best accomplish objectives in different ranch situations is also a part of the decision-making experience. Understanding and managing cow milk production is an important component in developing management and systems strategies. Students get experience in thinking through the interconnectivity of these and numerous other ranch management decisions.

Ironically, until 2015, formal decision-making training was not a part of the Nebraska Ranch Practicum curriculum. Since 2015, a hands-on two-hour introduction to decision-making at the beginning of the Practicum has served as a foundation for the issue-based decision applications in the rest of the practicum curriculum. The main session topics where economics and formal decision-making processes are emphasized are shown in Table 1.

In 2016, Johannes Siebert and Reinhard Kunz published an article in the European Journal of Operational Research in which they described a scale measuring six dimensions of proactive decision making. Four of these dimensions

**Table 1. Economic and decision-making topics in the Nebraska Ranch Practicum**

Session & Month	Topic / Concept	Location	Time allotted
1 June	Introduction to decision-making	Classroom	2 hrs.
	Introduction to systems thinking	Classroom	1.25 hrs.
2 June	Field applications of beef and forage systems	Field	1 hr.
3 July	Cattle markets and marketing strategies	Classroom	1 hr.
	Introduction to unit cost of production	Classroom	1.25 hrs.
4 September	Cull cow management and marketing	Classroom	0.75 hrs.
	Risk management strategies	Classroom	1 hr.
5 September	Implications of calving systems	Classroom	1.25 hrs.
	Ranch scale monitoring	Field	2.25 hrs.
6 November	Calf retention decisions	Classroom	1 hr.
	Selection and development of replacement heifers.	Classroom	1 hr.
7 January	Evaluating alternative enterprises	Classroom	2 hrs.
	Optimizing harvest endpoints	Classroom	0.75 hrs.
8 January	Roadmap – tying it all together (including Q&A discussion)	Classroom	1.25 hrs.

are concerning cognitive skills (systematical identification of objectives, systematical identification of alternatives, systematical identification of information, and using a decision radar). Two of these dimensions cover proactive personality traits (striving for improvement and showing initiative).

With the generous assistance of Dr. Siebert, we started using this assessment tool to determine the pre and post-proactive decision-making skills of Nebraska Ranch Practicum participants starting in 2017. The results indicate significant improvement in Practicum participants' cognitive skills over the course of the Practicum. Specifically, students consistently indicate the decision training and subsequent ranch practicum curriculum help open the process for identifying more and better management alternatives.

The Nebraska Ranch Practicum is a multi-disciplinary, multi-day educational effort to build management and decision-making skills for participants interested in beef cattle production. Enrollment ranges from 20 – 35 students per year. Since 1999, approximately 750 students from 15 states have participated in the Ranch Practicum. Participants have been ranch owners, ranch hands, veterinarians, graduate and undergraduate students from UNL, agricultural lenders, teachers, consultants, Extension educators, and government agency employees. The 30 participants in the 2021-2022 Nebraska Ranch Practicum influenced decisions on 471,440 acres and 55,398 head of livestock. Participants estimated the value of the Practicum at \$8.31/head of cattle owned with a benefit of \$36,149/operation and a total reported economic impact of \$216,894. Ranching is a challenging environment in which to make decisions. The management and decision-making skills taught in the Nebraska Ranch Practicum have led to positive results we can continue to build upon as ranching evolves into the future.

Applications for the 2022-23 Nebraska Ranch Practicum open soon. For more information on the Nebraska Ranch Practicum, visit the website <http://nebraskaranchpracticum.unl.edu/>, or contact Troy Walz (phone: 308.872.6831, e-mail: [troy.walz@unl.edu](mailto:troy.walz@unl.edu)).

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