

# Asking Questions Leads to New Management Practices

**A**round the Arhart farm, ruts are for tires – not management strategies says Andrew Arhart, 37, who farms with his dad, LaVerne, and brother, Jonathan, near Alpena, S.D.

“We have so many more options when we’re willing to ask, ‘what can I do differently?’”

Operating a diverse farming operation, the Arharts farm 1,100-acres of wheat, corn and soybeans; manage 1,900-acres

of pastureland; operate a 250-head cow/calf herd; an 800-head feedlot; and finish 11,000 hogs each year.

They frequently question management practices used in every aspect of their farming operation. However, asking questions have had the greatest impact on the family’s cattle operation.

Implementing new technology to improve their herd has been part of their livestock operation since its beginning says Arhart.

**Story & photos by Lura Roti, for Land & Livestock**



Andrew Arhart, 37, farms with his dad, LaVerne, and brother, Jonathan, near Alpena, S.D. The family farms with the philosophy of doing more with less.

We've always been pretty progressive. Dad and his brother, LeRoy, were one of the first producers in South Dakota to use artificial insemination – we've been Aling for almost 50 years on our place," says Arhart, adding that the family embraced ultrasound technology in 1995 to monitor carcass quality.

What began as a way to select breeding stock based on carcass quality, turned into a way to receive marketing premiums.

"Now that we've been ultrasounding for 16 years, our quality grades have really moved up," he says. "We expect our cattle to marble when they are yield grade twos so we can sell them early and target premiums for leanness and grade. We can confidently put together a load of cattle and market on a grid to pick up an additional \$25 to \$50 a head premium."

His wife, Melissa, took what the family learned and runs a sideline ultrasound business helping area feedlot operators grid market their cattle and monitor when they should harvest their fat cattle to maximize profits.

"We can ultrasound the cattle at re-implanting and know when they are ready to sell much more accurately than eyeballing them. If a feedlot can sell finished cattle three weeks earlier than they planned, they save quite a bit on inputs," he says.

Arhart met Melissa at a cattle sale. After she joined the family farming operation, she encouraged Arhart to take a different approach to cattle handling, based on what she had learned from Dr. Tom Noffsinger, a feedlot veterinarian from Nebraska. He says her suggestions, along with Dr. Noffsinger guidance, changed the way they manage their herd and reduced the need for extra labor.

"We'd been married a couple years and all of us were running ragged. We thought that if we were going to move forward with this many livestock we'd need to hire some additional help. She said that if we took a step back and learned how to move cattle, we'd only need one person," he recalls. "She was right."

Arhart says the traditional methods the family had been

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*Andrew Arhart*

using — herding cattle by forcing them to their destination or through the facilities was a lot of work. Now his stockmanship skills encourage trust and allow him to move cattle and check for illnesses alone — even when most of his feedlot animals are out grazing.

"Learning how to work our cattle has changed the way we do things," he says. "Today we can go into the pasture on horseback and make the cattle walk by us to check for pink eye, or I can walk right up to a calf and tag it in the pasture because they trust us."

#### *Using a feedlot differently*

Arhart says the family farm is able to support three families because they've learned to do more with the resources they have. Instead of increasing the number of acres they farm, the men decided to get into the hog business and expand their cattle operation by maximizing forage production on their grassland.

Even when the hog markets are down, Arhart says the hog operation pays for itself by providing an abundant supply of organic nutrients they apply on their crop acres.

They maximize forage production through intensive

grazing and encouraging species diversity. When they do buy land, they avoid bidding wars by purchasing land that is enrolled in federal grassland easements, and can only be used for grazing or hunting.

"By intensively managing our grassland we can run more cattle and we don't need more grain," Arhart says.

When there is a surplus of available grass, they turn their feedlot cattle out to graze —using their feedlot the last 100 to 120 days.

"I use my feedlot differently these days," he says. "Before I was in a rut, I would buy the cattle, put them in the feedlot and sell them in March. Now if I know I'll have a lot of grass, I'll look for cattle that I can hold and not put a lot of inputs into. I can always feed my grain to the pigs."

About eight years ago Arhart began working with forage specialists to increase the species diversity in his pastures.

"Everyone talks about site-specific farming and using grid sampling on crop acres, I manage my grassland the same way," he says. "I began working with Millborn Seeds to develop blends that will work in my pastures. When you turn a cow out on a pasture with a lot of diversity, if they won't eat one species, they will eat something else."

He extends his grazing season with cover crops, and this summer temporarily converted cropland he was unable to plant due to excess moisture, to a late-season forage he recently hayed.

"Since it was too wet to plant wheat in some fields this year, I planted beardless barley late spring. I just harvested it and got 2.5 tons per acre," says Arhart, who after haying the barley hay, planted a cover crop mixture of oats and turnips on the same ground. "Those are irrigated acres, so I can plant, give the cover crops a shot of water and I'm assured a second crop that I will graze this fall."

"Because we don't need as much grain these days, we have created more opportunities on our grassland."