



## *Help can be hard to find*

This was the year you were going to tag each calf with reference to sire and dam, rent that alfalfa field across the road for hay to boost winter feed quality, cross-fence the south place, precondition the calves and clear brush off the west hill.

No matter how many great ideas you have, nothing will take shape on the ranch without some good old-fashioned labor. That's where the rubber of your mind's spinning wheels meets the road of reality.

In many cases, you are both labor and management, because you own or rent the place or because the owner gave you that level of autonomy. However, without help, the amount of work you can get done by yourself is limited.

Big projects, from pond and building construction to fencing, often require the hiring of custom contractors. If you have enough expertise, equipment and labor, you can take on any job, but it's hard to be good at everything.

There are those who aspire never to hire outside labor; that works best in big families with diverse skills and a common purpose. With today's smaller families, a few good ideas may not get a fair trial. Some producers hire workers from time to time, but nobody stays around long enough to become a regular.

Work may be seasonal and incredibly demanding for short periods. That naturally leads to situations where good help is hard to find when you want it.

On the average cow-calf operation, there is no need for a full-time employee. A single cow-calf producer can handle most chores for at least a hundred, maybe several hundred cows. For the crunch times such as haying, breeding and weaning, however, you may need part-time help—what the business world calls a “temp.” In some communities you can trade labor with neighbors, but outside of that tradition, temps can be hard to find.

The supply of knowledgeable and available cowboy temps declines as veterans find steady work or a place of their own. Those who remain are increasingly professional and booked far in advance. As for high schoolers with cow sense, extracurricular activities take up a lot of their time, and some who could be good help simply don't need your money.

College ag students far from home often make good temps, and sometimes work into full-time positions as you become better acquainted and recognize a good fit. Friends or family with regular jobs who like a change of pace can be excellent occasional help, if they remain sharp in their skills.

Across the U.S., there are nearly a million agricultural workers. They command an estimated \$18 billion in annual pay, so it's a bigger issue than your trying to find a guy who can rake hay.

A popular misconception among non-farmers is that “family farms” are those that hire no outside labor. If you cross that bridge, by some definitions you have become a commercial or even “corporate” farm.

Regardless of that image, when you need full-time help, two popular options are classified ads in farm papers, and inquiring at employment agencies that specialize in agriculture. Consult your tax accountant on labor and payroll regulations, but you and your prospects may find advantages in some non-cash compensation such as access to ranch horses and vehicles.

You should also structure pay to include incentives connected to your goals. These could relate to complete records, conception rate, health of calves after weaning or progress toward higher carcass values. It may be best to avoid “piece work” incentives that reward quantity of labor over quality.

Allow plenty of time for interviewing candidates, with the aim of making sure they fit your needs. When you find someone who seems to fit, start with an orientation period and progress to a “trust but verify” period. The improper ear-tag application or too-damp hay bale does not necessarily mean the employee lied about his capabilities. He just needs correctional feedback.

Depending on the job, an employee logbook can be a valuable management and communication tool for reviewing past work and planning for the next task. If lessons don’t stick or a new employee seems unreliable in the early going, it’s probably best for everyone to end the relationship promptly.

More likely, a positive relationship will develop over time as incentives build common cause. Remember that if you treat “labor” like a commodity, you’ll get no better than average results. People are the most valuable resources in agriculture.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we’ll look at maternal influence. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail [cabsteve@aol.com](mailto:cabsteve@aol.com).

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