Assembling a Herd

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Taking the time to do some planning before you assemble a herd will save you a lot of time, money and headaches later. Here is a brief overview of things to consider before you assemble a herd of livestock. This information is not intended to replace the advice of your veterinarian. Always contact your veterinarian when you have a question about animal health.

1. Prepare the premises.
Before you bring the first animal home, you should have your facilities ready. Put up fencing that is safe and effective; the specifics will depend on the species you intend to raise, and this information is available at your county Extension office. Fence animals out of riparian areas, but make sure they have a reliable source of clean water in several locations.

Have some type of restraint system so you can handle individual animals. You may need a livestock chute so you can give vaccinations, de-worm animals, perform pregnancy exams, or do other routine procedures.

If you have a barn, make sure it is safe and well ventilated. Eliminate protruding nails, exposed wires and other dangers. Install gutters and drainpipes to reduce mudholes around doors. Remove all junk, trash and debris from your animals’ environment.

Identify and fence out or eliminate toxic plants in the animals’ pasture. It will take some effort to learn about these weeds in advance, but your work could save a life. Also remove batteries, lead paint, antifreeze, corrosive materials, solvents, stagnant water, and any other potential sources of toxins.

Calculate how much hay and feed you will need for your animals, and make sure you have enough on hand before you bring any livestock home. Your Extension agent can help you determine how much feed you will need. The amount to stockpile will depend on your animals’ needs as well as your storage space, budget and the anticipated future availability and costs of the
feed. Make sure to keep grain and other concentrates safely locked away from livestock so they cannot overeat it. Develop a trace mineral feeding program, with special emphasis on Selenium.

2. **Obtain healthy animals.**

After you decide what species of livestock you want to raise, start looking for sources. Try to buy locally—the animals will be more acclimated to the area, it will be easier to research the seller’s reputation, and transportation costs will be lower. How do you find out who has animals for sale? Check local and regional newspapers, especially agricultural papers. Talk with your county Extension agent and local veterinarians. Look for fliers at feed stores. Contact your local livestock growers’ association or cattlemen’s group. Try an Internet search, using your location and the breed of animal you are looking for. Consider paying for a “wanted” ad in your newspaper.

After you locate a potential source of animals but before you put down your hard-earned cash, do some research! Investigate the reputation of the seller and the quality of his/her livestock. If they are reputable and have healthy stock, the seller should not object to your contacting their vet and asking questions about their farm and livestock. Also, speak with others who have purchased animals from this source to see how well the animals worked out for them. Were the animals healthy? Were they animals easy to deal with, or were some of them too timid or aggressive? What is the seller’s return policy?

Ask the seller for documentation about the animals’ history and health status. This includes ages, vaccination and de-worming histories, any illnesses and treatments, breeding and pregnancies, routine or other surgical procedures, etc. If the animals are registered, be sure to get their registration papers.

Although it will significantly increase your costs, it is wise to do some laboratory tests on your foundation animals. Consult with your veterinarian for specific recommendations. Some diseases of concern include:

**CATTLE**
- Johne’s Disease
- Tuberculosis
- Brucellosis
- Bovine Leukosis
- Bovine Viral Diarrhea

**GOATS**
- Johne’s Disease
- Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis
  *Caseous lymphadenitis
- Tuberculosis
- Brucellosis

**SHEEP**
- Johne’s Disease
- Ovine Pleuropneumonia
- Genetic testing (Spider, Scrapie)
  *Caseous lymphadenitis
- Brucellosis

**SWINE**
- Atrophic Rhinitis

Pre-purchase examinations by a veterinarian are a wise investment, especially if you are purchasing breeding animals. Breeding soundness examinations will identify infertile animals.
Do not purchase foundation animals from sale yards. You rarely know these animals’ health history, age, why they are being sold, their pedigree, pregnancy status, or anything else about them. They are often carriers of serious diseases such as Salmonellosis, Cryptosporidiosis, Orf, mastitis, Johne’s Disease, Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis, Caseous Lymphadenitis, pneumonia, and others.

3. Caring for Your Herd.
If you are able to assemble your herd from a single source, it will simplify the isolation and quarantine procedures you’ll need to do on your farm. If you have no other animals on your farm, there is no special procedure needed. If others of the same species are present, you should isolate the new animals downstream and downwind from the other animals for at least one month; do chores for the new animals last.

Take care not to purchase more animals than you can afford to feed and care for, nor more than your land can support. Consult your Extension agent for advice about stocking density. Many of the brittle acreages in our area cannot support many head, and soon become drylots. This poor management practice causes long-term damage to the land and reduces its productivity; overstocking also can have a negative impact on water quality.

Vaccinate your animals for appropriate diseases as needed. Vaccinations to consider include but are not limited to:

**CATTLE**
- Bovine Viral Diarrhea
- Leptospirosis
- Bovine Respiratory Syncytial Virus
- Parainfluenza Type 3
- Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis
  - Vibriosis
  - Pinkeye
  - Rotavirus
  - Coronavirus
  - E. coli
  - Haemophilus somnus
  - Redwater
  - 8-way Clostridium
  - Brucellosis

**SHEEP**
- 3 or 8-way Clostridium
- †Caseous Lymphadenitis
- †Vibriosis
- †Chlamydia psittaci (EAE)
- †Soremouth
- †Bluetongue
- †Foot rot

**HORSES**
- Eastern and Western Encephalitis
- Tetanus
- West Nile Virus
  - †Influenza
  - †Venezuelan Encephalitis
  - †Potomac Horse Fever
  - †Strangles
  - †Rhinopneumonitis
  - †Rabies

**GOATS**
- 3 or 8-way Clostridium
  - †Soremouth
  - †Caseous Lymphadenitis

**SWINE**
- Erysipelas
- Bordetella bronchiseptica
- Pasteurella multocida

*Caseous lymphadenitis: testing via visual inspection for abscesses and herd history of abscesses

†Are not necessary for all animals; work with your vet to determine your herd’s vaccination needs
Develop an effective parasite control program. Work with your veterinarian to select the appropriate wormer for your animals and their stage of lactation and/or pregnancy. Weigh your animals to avoid under- or over-dosing. Pay particular attention to the parasite status of young animals: some parasites can kill them quickly. Use fecal examinations to monitor the parasite status of your herd.

Don’t rely on your memory; use tags, tattoos, or another reliable system to identify individuals. Without identification, you run the risk of breeding brothers to sisters or mothers to sons, or making other major management errors. Keep excellent records. You can never have too much information! To make essential management decisions, you may need to know how old an animal is, the pounds of milk it produced, who its sire and dam were, what treatment it received, etc. Write information down and keep it in a safe place, such as a computer database.

For optimal animal health and human safety, develop an effective bio-security program. Keep all equipment clean and disinfect, disinfect, disinfect. Pay particular attention to milk bottles, nipples, pails, pill guns, milking equipment, your hands, your boots, syringes, needles, feed bunks, and water troughs. Bleach is an excellent disinfectant, but surfaces must already be very clean for bleach to work; it is deactivated by manure, dirt or other organic matter. A good way to drastically change the micro-environment in your facility is to periodically use a steam jenny; this uses heat and pressure to kill bacteria and disturb their environment. Periodically clean and let housing areas dry thoroughly (preferably by exposure to the sun), lime the base, then bed well with clean straw. Draining wet areas where possible will also help improve sanitation.

When assembling or expanding a herd, the value of your veterinarian cannot be overemphasized. Your vet can help you locate healthy animals, design vaccination and worming programs, and advise you about nutrition programs. Your county Extension is also a good source of information, and has many helpful resources available for you.