This very abbreviated form of the checksheet is designed to stimulate critical thinking in planning a farm on which the primary land use is production of beef cattle. The sustainability of a farm relates to many factors revolving around farm management, use of resources and quality of life. The series of questions is intended to serve as an assessment of awareness rather than rating of management practices. Carefully think about how decisions made in one area impact the results in other areas of your farm or management.

After reviewing the preliminary information here, you may want to consider using the longer version of the checksheet for a more complete assessment of your farm.

INVENTORY OF FARM RESOURCES AND MANAGEMENT

Size of farm______ Number of: Mature cows______ Replacement heifers______ Stockers__________

Other types of animal enterprises ______________________________________________________

Breeds of cattle ________________________________________________________________

Number of pastures on farm______ Number of ponds and water sources __________________________

Livestock market and months you market in ________________________________

Months you calve in ________________________________

How many acres of the following do you have?

______ predominantly cool season perennial grasses ________________________________

______ predominantly warm season perennial grasses ________________________________

______ mixture of warm and cool season grasses ______ pastures with legumes________

______ cool season annuals____________________ warm season annuals __________________________

______ pastures that can be stockpiled for late fall/winter grazing ______

Which practices are part of your grazing system? short duration, slow rotation, continuous

Give major soil types and productivity indexes for the farm _____________________________

________________________________

When and with what do you fertilize? ________________________________________________

What are the top five strengths of your operation? _________________________________

What are the top five problems?____________________________________________________

Do you have written goals for your operation?_______ If yes, briefly give an overview.

________________________________

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INSTRUCTIONS: In the margin for each question on the following pages, place a checkmark if it needs further thought or leave blank if it is not important.

I. CATTLE AND FORAGE PROGRAM

A. Herd health and reproductive management

Do you

_____ What is the overall appearance of your whole cattle herd? ________________________________

_____ Do your cattle appear to be thrifty, contented, and performing to your satisfaction? __________________

_____ pregnancy check cows? ____________ fertility test bulls? ________________________________

_____ have a defined breeding/calving season? ________________________________

_____ calve the majority of your cows the first 21 days of calving season? ________________________________

_____ routinely condition score cows? ____________ before breeding? ________________________________

_____ have a clean area for calving? ____________ move pairs to clean area after calving? __________________

_____ feed and water in clean areas? ________________________________

_____ have handling facilities which minimize stress to livestock and handler? ________________________________

_____ use handling techniques that minimize stress? ________________________________

_____ What vaccinations do you give? ________________________________

_____ When, how often and on what basis do you deworm? ________________________________

Do you have problems with

_____ open cows (> 10%) or late calving cows? ____________ calving difficulty (pull >10% of the calves)? ________________________________

_____ calf scours and/or pneumonia? ____________ internal/external parasites? ________________________________

_____ grass tetany? ____________ fescue toxicoses (or heat stress)? ________________________________

_____ other health problems? ________________________________

Are animals stressed

_____ when worked? ____________ during weather extremes? ________________________________

_____ at weaning time? ____________ do you have wind breaks in winter? ________________________________

_____ do you use low-stress weaning techniques? ________________________________

B. Breeding, genetics and selection program

_____ What are the goals of your breeding program? ________________________________

_____ What traits do you select for or cull against when choosing sires or replacements? ________________________________

_____ On what basis do you sell surplus animals? ________________________________

_____ On what basis do you choose herd sires and where do you purchase sires? ________________________________

_____ Why did you choose the breeds you have? ________________________________

_____ Do you raise or purchase replacement heifers? ________________________________

C. Nutrition management

_____ Does your forage base match your animals’ needs—can you meet those needs with pasture? ____________

_____ Does your forage management program ensure adequate forage availability? ________________________________

_____ Could changing calving season allow you to more adequately meet nutrition requirements of cows with forages you have rather than changing the forage base? ________________________________

_____ Do you cut hay at the proper time to insure good quality? ________________________________

_____ Do your animals spot graze pastures to the point that some areas are severely overgrazed and some areas undergrazed and then have to be clipped? ________________________________

_____ Do your cattle have access to all your pastures in late winter when cool season forages first start to break dormancy and keeps the forage from growing rapidly? ________________________________

_____ Does your haying program include cutting pastures which are not needed for grazing rather than
allocating areas of the farm just for hay production?

Do you have enough pastures to set up a rotational grazing program, i.e. move cattle at least once a week? If not, can pastures be divided easily?

Do your sources of water for livestock prevent dividing pastures?

Are special grazing techniques such as forward grazing used to meet the needs of animals with higher nutrition requirement than others and also utilize available forage?

Do you prepare your cattle for winter by adding condition in the fall?

Are some of the mature cows too thin?

If spring calving, have calves been weaned to decrease nutrition requirements of cows, and allow cows to regain weight by putting them on good quality pastures?

If fall calving, are cows in condition to rebreed on schedule?

Have pastures been conditioned for putting weight gain on cows by stockpiling high quality forage? (over 2500 lbs of dry matter per acre of vegetative forage)?

II. FARM MANAGEMENT

A. Records

Do you make good use of a record-keeping system?

Do you know your actual cost of production per acre? per animal?

Do you know what it costs to produce, harvest, and feed a bale of hay?

graze an acre of pasture? grate one cow for one day?

B. Farm planning

Would diversification with other animal species add some benefit or add extra income?

Are you testing soils in each pasture or field at least every three years?

Are you making effective use of your fertilizer expenditures?

Could you decrease N fertilizer through more effective use of legumes?

Are you using chicken litter/animal manures/municipal sludge products?

Would using those products be more cost-effective than using commercial fertilizer?

Would using components of fertilizer, i.e. K or N, be more effective?

Would using lime allow a decrease in fertilizer expenditures?

Do you own more equipment than you need?

Could you decrease the equipment you need if you relied more on grazing?

Do you buy equipment for tax reasons, even though you don’t need the equipment?

Does that equipment expenditure for tax reasons really increase your net income?

What are your primary purchased feed expenditures? protein, energy, minerals, hay

How do you know which of the purchased feeds you actually need?

C. Marketing

Do you market your animals when the price is best?

Could you change your management (forage, calving season, etc.) to allow you to sell cattle on a more timely basis?

Would it be cost effective to retain ownership of your cattle through another growth phase?

Could you produce a more marketable product with a change in your breeding program?

Are you in an area where niche marketing could be established?

III. ASSESSMENT OF PASTURES, SOILS AND WATERSHED

A. Pasture assessment

What are your pasture management goals?

Do you need better quality forage available?
Do you know how individual pastures rank in productivity? ________________________________

Are there spots of bare ground within pastures? ________________________________

Do you have any erosion problems? ________________________________

Is the pasture grazed fairly uniformly or are there areas of spot grazing? ___________________________

Is there adequate but not excessive residue in the pasture? ________________________________

Are the animals doing a good job of controlling the edible weeds? ________________________________

Could changes in water/mineral location or the pasture shape impact the grazing pattern? ___________

Is water runoff excessive, especially on slopes? ________________________________

Are pastures resting long enough to allow plant regrowth and maintain root reserves? ___________

B. Soil assessment

Do you have soil maps of your farm and understand the productivity index of each soil type? ________

Do you have specific problems to address, such as fragipans, poor drainage, compaction? ________

What is the microbial activity in your soil?_________ What does soil smell like? ____________________

When was your last soil test?_____________________Do you routinely use lime?_____________________

What is the organic matter level in your pastures/fields? ________________________________

How many days does it take grass or crops to exhibit drought stress? ________________________________

Do you have any soil nutrient deficiencies or imbalances that impair production? ____________________

Are soil fertility levels adequate to meet forage production targets? ________________________________

Would a change in fencing allow better use of pastures according to productivity of soil? ___________

C. Watershed assessment

What are the water drainage patterns into and from your farm? ________________________________

Do you have an understanding of the nutrient flow on your farm? ________________________________

Do you have major riparian areas, with flowing water in them most of the time? ____________________

Do you allow livestock frequent limited access to manage the vegetation of riparian areas? ___________

Do you time your fertilizing or spreading of litter/manure to prevent runoff of nutrients? ___________

Are farm ponds full of algae?_________Does your soil absorb and retain rainfall?___________________

IV. FARM GOALS

As you consider the goals of your farming operation, are you

examining your livestock production program to become more cost effective?_____________________

assessing the soil, plant, and water resources? ________________________________

analyzing your marketing program and the diversity of products available to market?_________________

evaluating your quality of life from a family and community perspective? _________________________

V. SUMMARY

Now that you have completed the assessment of your farm, go back through the questions you indicated as high priority items to increase economic or environmental sustainability. Then use the sustainability manual to explore potential changes in your management program or planning. Spend time reviewing the areas which could be emphasized to allow you to meet your goals.

Have your perceptions of your weaknesses and strengths changed? ______________________________

What are the highest priority areas for you to emphasize? ________________________________

Have you put on paper your goals for your family and your operation? _________________________