



# The World Of Large Animals

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Land and animal ownership can be personally rewarding, but neither come without the responsibility of good stewardship. Do your homework and make a confident, well-thought out decision before stepping into the world of large animals. There's more to it than you can imagine.

## What's Required?

Animals require adequate care. Proper fencing is a must, and should be checked at least monthly to ensure that no wires are broken and gates remain closed. The last thing you want is to receive a call in the middle of the night reporting that your animals have escaped and are on the highway. A dependable water source is necessary and feed must be provided when grazing becomes seasonally limited (late summer, fall, winter). Water can be pumped from a well, but the pump must be checked frequently enough to ensure that it is operating and water troughs should be checked to see that cut-off floats are working properly. Ponds offer a lower maintenance source of water, but may dry up during drought.

Cattle typically do not need as much attention as other species, but this does not say that they can be left to fend for themselves. On the other hand, horses usually need more frequent attention. Because of their playful nature and the likelihood of being easily frightened, young horses are more subject to injury from wire cuts than are older horses. Some people choose to own exotic wildlife such as llamas, ostrich, emu and various species of deer. The amount of investment in these animals is usually high, and to not provide daily care and monitoring would not be prudent.

Large animals require equipment. In most cases, a trailer must be available to haul a sick or injured animal to the veterinary clinic or to transport animals to a sale facility. If one is not owned, it must be borrowed or someone must be hired to haul. Pens and handling facilities to temporarily hold animals for various management procedures are needed too. This is only a minimum of equipment needs.

## What Do Cows Cost?

Often people want to reduce the cost of their initial investment by buying the cheapest cattle available. From an economic standpoint, this is smart, but frequently cattle bought at bargain prices are a tremendous risk. These particular cattle are sometimes sick, old, and generally not productive. In most cases, inexperienced buyers do not have the expertise to succeed financially in this particular situation. Buy young, healthy cattle from a reputable rancher or professional marketing agent. If you want to have a cow/calf operation, do not buy old cows, because these cattle are already beyond their most productive years. Instead buy three or four year old cows or replacement heifers that have already been exposed to a bull and are confirmed as pregnant. Even better, look for "three-in-one" packages (pregnant female with a calf at her side). These animals allow you to recover some of your initial costs more rapidly.

Purchase costs will be extremely variable between different types of cattle and from year to year. Registered (purebred) cows may cost thousands of dollars, whereas prices for commercial (non-registered) cows may range from \$450 to \$650 or more per head, depending on their quality and current cattle prices.

The general needs of either type are similar, but purebred cattle are more expensive and involve additional practices that are required to obtain registerable status with their respective breed association. This usually involves extensive data collection and record keeping which may be difficult to achieve unless there is a full-time overseer.

### **How Much Land Do They Need?**

An important factor to consider is stocking rate which is defined as the number of acres required per animal unit (in this case, one mature cow), and the appropriate rate varies by location. Some pastures are more productive than others depending on rainfall, soil type, specie of grass, amount of brush (which cattle usually do not eat), and a number of other factors. There can even be different stocking rates within a ranch because not every pasture is alike. Therefore, to determine the appropriate rate for your pastures, consult the Natural Resource Conservation Service in your area or the County Extension agent in your home county.

### **What Other Things Should Be Considered?**

If no one permanently lives on your property, you will have to take measures to keep your home, surrounding property, and livestock secure from theft. Out-of-the-way places that are frequently unoccupied are easy targets for thieves. It is best to have a hired overseer (or neighbor) to make sure that entry gates to the property and gates around working pens and loading chutes are locked. This overseer can also check on the dwelling during winter to take measures that prevent water pipes from freezing. This person can also be asked to check on livestock water and to put out feed for the animals when needed.

If you want animals on your property but do not want the responsibilities of animal care, consider leasing to someone who will graze their animals on your land. Land is often leased on a per acre basis, and rates are variable depending on the amount of acreage available, the quality of the pastures, the dependability of the water supply, condition of fences, existence and condition of animal handling facilities. Lease contracts are written in many ways and can be made to suit both the landowner and lessee.

### **Are There Any Tax Breaks?**

There are a few tax benefits associated with land and cattle, but owning cattle does not guarantee permanent tax benefits. They must generate a profit frequently enough to avoid being classed as a passive investment (see your tax consultant or accountant). The land itself can generate tax benefits if agricultural exemption can be obtained on the property. Land classed as "agricultural" is indeed taxed but at a much lower rate than "non-agricultural" land. You must talk to your county tax appraiser, because the requirements for this particular exemption vary greatly between appraisal districts. In the past, owning only one head of livestock would qualify your land for agricultural exemption. In many cases, this is no longer true.

For more information contact your local County Extension Offices. They offer a number of free agricultural publications. You may also want to counsel with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, professional livestock consultants, agricultural lenders, agricultural accountants, veterinarians, and faculty members at agricultural schools and colleges. You may want to subscribe to some beef industry magazines or read some of the many available books on beef cattle production, but be sure to get recent editions. The industry is dynamic, and it is important to stay current with its changes.