

Course pays off for rancher

Another series offered in January

By JOHN HALBERT
Star Staff Writer

While "fly by wire" usually refers to aviation, Bud Peterson has been flying his ranch by WIRE for the last couple years, and so far he likes the results.

Peterson runs a cow-calf operation on about 6,000 acres south and east of Miles City, with small grains in summer fallow on a small portion of it.

Late in 1994, he signed up for WIRE - Western Integrated Ranch/Farm Education - a course that emphasizes the philosophy and process of management rather than rote knowledge of resources and techniques.

"I was trying to find a different way to diversify," Peterson said. "This course is set up to look at the different ways to use land - different ways to manage the grass on it, different ways to manage water flows. It looks at timber, water use, precipitation. There's a monitoring system for every one of those."

It means a lot of paperwork, he said, but the end result is a way to tell "whether you're winning or losing."

"I felt it was just an exceptional course."

The WIRE course will be offered again in Miles City on Tuesday nights, Jan. 7 through Feb. 4. The \$150-per-ag-operation fee includes all instruction, two reference books and papers, a financial calculator and refreshments.

Each six-hour class has some formal presentations, but the emphasis is on hands-on work. The five-week course allows participants to start applying the ideas to their own operations and come back with the questions that they generate.

Further information is available from the Extension Office in the Custer County Courthouse, 406-233-3370.

Extension Agent Olaf Sherwood said it is important that anyone interested contact his office as soon as possible. The course may be canceled without enough participants to justify it.

Peterson said his results have justified his participation.

"In this day and age, the bottom line is profit and loss. And while this may start out costing you 150 bucks, in the end it will repay you a whole lot more," he said.

His grain operation is "pretty much cut and dried" by the federally mandated conservation plan he adopted a couple years ago, so WIRE

did little to change that.

But Peterson has made changes in his cattle management and other land uses that he expects will pay off soon.

Splitting his five pastures into 10 and putting in a new reservoir to allow a rest-rotation grazing system has allowed Peterson to increase his cattle numbers by 15 percent, even in a drouthy summer like the region just had.

"You've always got fresh pasture to move to, and when you do get a little rain, it gives the fresh growth a head start," he said. "Then when you do go back on to it, even after it's cured, there's at least something there to get a hold of."

The new fence and reservoir were an investment, although he was able to use a federal cost-share program that helped quite a bit. "It might be another year yet, between the reservoir and the fence," to get those things paid off, he said.

Peterson also has started to retain ownership on calves, a change in the way he does business.

He also renovated a cabin on his place and rented it to deer hunters from Wisconsin, and he is considering offering it for summer vacationers.

"This first year, we probably just broke even, with the cost of getting it going, but I'm sure there's a potential for some profit there," Peterson said.

He credits the WIRE program for showing him how the changes he has made will work - far more than if he just tried them as a gamble.

Not only does it outline how to monitor a ranch's resources, it plugs the numbers into several mathematical formulas to see whether what is planned will be profitable. The special calculator that comes with the course runs those formulas.

WIRE also lets participants work through scenarios and do their own calculations in class, rather than just telling them a technique is out there in a book somewhere.

"Without going through this program, unless you were talking to someone who was real knowledgeable, you'd never have any idea this stuff was there to work with," Peterson said.

"You have to set some sort of goals to make this whole thing work. You can't just want to keep cruising along; you've got to want to do something better."

Peterson added that the cost is essentially split, because the spouse is strongly urged to participate. His wife attended when she could.

"We'd come home at night and discuss it," he recalled. He added he is still using the books and monitoring forms he got with the course.

The calculator has moved on. "Mine got commandeered and went to college," he said.