**The Systems 360° Program: A working group for beef producers in Alabama**

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**What is the Systems 360° Program?**

The Systems 360° Program is an Extension program designed to educate Alabama beef producers on sustainable land, animal, and marketing strategies in their operations. The name ‘360°’ came from the idea that a beef producer has to wear many hats…in other words, there are many complex management considerations to be a successful beef producer and that they should be all encompassing. The purpose of this program is to allow discussion-based interactions on these topics rather than formal, classroom based meetings. The idea is to provide higher-level discussion on the application of on-farm management practices, and was designed to target producers who have more experience in the industry using a peer-to-peer leaning group (also known as a ‘working group’).

**What is a systems working group?**

A Systems Working Group is a group of beef producers that share a common interest in learning more about sustainable land, animal, marketing strategies. Specifically, this group meets periodically to discuss a designated topic of interest and view applications of technologies associated with each topic. A working group is designed to meet at multiple locations over a defined period of time (example: 5 meetings over a one year time period) and provide hands-on, experiential learning for participants. Examples include visiting Auburn research farms, producer farms, or other affiliated agriculture agencies to view current work or successes with the topic of discussion for the meeting session. Some formal discussion/presentations by Extension agents or specialists could be integrated into these meetings to provide foundational material on the discussion topic for a given discipline area.

**Curriculum**

A set of curriculum has been developed to help facilitate the start of a series of working groups in Alabama. The curriculum includes the Alabama Beef Systems Management handbook which consists of a series of publications on forages, water, climate, herd management, and economic considerations in beef operations in Alabama. These publications are meant to serve as “starter material” for discussion among the working groups. This handbook can also be downloaded as individual ANR publications that can be printed in bulk outside of the handbook. A series of complementary PowerPoints has been developed on these topics as well. PowerPoints may be integrated into working group discussions to help provide an overview of the topic area and are designed to be delivered by agents or specialists.

**Who all is involved?**

ANS and Forage Extension agents, specialist, and beef producers

The suggested target audience is producers with at least 5 years of experience in the beef industry. The idea is to allow more established producers to provide feedback during discussions and potentially use their farms as “showcase” locations for sustainable beef management concepts.

**How should this be marketed?**

Up to the Extension agent to determine best marketing strategy for their area. Gerry Thompson and Kim have facilitated a working group in the Tennessee Valley Region and have experience on what worked for this region.

Key Questions When Deciding to Develop a Working Group include: 1) Who is my target audience in my region?, 2) How do I begin to reach them? , 3) How do I “start” the working group or gauge interest from potential participants?, and 4) How do I set up a series of working group discussions that is meaningful to the group?

**Ways to Tie in With Existing Programming**

The Systems Working Group may be a good “follow up” program for a meeting series or workshop that you have conducted in the last year. If you want to continue to track the individuals from previous meetings, involving them in the working group may help you track their progress in adopting the management practices discussed at our Extension meetings.

**Potential Educational Model**

* Contact interested producers in your region and hold a “interest meeting” – this might be a standard extension meeting on a timely topic given the time of year the meeting is held. Have individuals commit to signing up for the working group at this meeting.
* Use the above meeting to determine the frequency of meetings and time of day that works best with the group. Suggested to target day/afternoon meetings since these will not likely occur during consecutive days/weeks.
  + A potential model is five meetings per year that highlights management during different seasons of the year. Cost is $10 per meeting or $50 total to cover miscellaneous travel costs, supplies, snacks, drinks, etc. The decision to provide a meal is up to the individual REA. Additional costs may be required to cover meal expenses.
* Develop a list of meeting topics following the general curriculum from the Systems 360 resources. Organize meetings/locations. Integrate on-farm experiences as much as possible. Use other extension agents and specialists to help deliver and facilitate topic-based discussions and demonstrations as needed (live or via Zoom).
* Have a “final meeting” for the working group that surveys producers on their experience in the group and willingness to continue.

**Success Stories**

* Visit with Gerry and Kim on pros/cons/ideas derived from the Tennessee Valley Working Group