

## Management Considerations for Absentee Landowners

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This paper is intended to highlight some things absentee landowners should consider regarding the management and care of their property. Some items listed may appear to be presented in a slightly negative tone, however that is not intended. The purpose of listing those particular situations is to present realistic conditions that landowners often do not consider.

One of the first priorities is to decide what your personal goals are for the property and what you intend to gain from owning it.

- A. Is it to be used strictly for rest and relaxation (a weekend getaway)?
- B. Is it to be used as a source of supplemental income? Do you want to generate a profit?
- C. Will it be used in some combination thereof?

Obviously a weekend getaway will be much easier to manage and maintain than would be property that is owned to generate income. About all that is required in the case of a weekend retreat is the need to make the property secure from intruders. If there is a dwelling on the property, regular mowing in the summer and frequent checks in the winter to ensure that water supply is protected from freezing may be all that is needed.

On the other hand, if there is an amount of land associated with the property, taxes may be prohibitive if only using the property as a weekend retreat. In that case, some kind of agricultural enterprise would be needed to obtain **agricultural exemption** to reduce property tax. You should check with the tax assessor in the county where the land is located to see what enterprises would qualify the land for agricultural exemption. Most people want some kind of livestock enterprise such as cattle and horses. Other opportunities include some sort of horticultural enterprise such as fruit, vegetables, nuts, and plant nurseries. However the latter choices may require a level of labor that change the weekend retreat into a weekend salt mine! Other opportunities include hay production, but be sure to consult the tax assessor first. In other cases, there may be an opportunity to harvest timber, but this obviously depends on the amount, type, and quality of timber.

In many cases, the landowner wants livestock, and the rest of this paper addresses some necessary inputs for livestock management and those situations that could realistically occur during your absence from the property.

1. What is the quality of fencing on the property? Is it secure enough to hold livestock? The last thing you want is to receive a phone call at your residence in the middle of the night saying that your cow is out. Even the best of fences will not be perfect, and this suggests that it might be wise to pay someone to check on the animals and fences

frequently. The amount to pay is negotiable, and you must decide what price is worth the comfort of knowing that your land and animals are secure. The overseer could also make sure that cattle are fed and that water is continuously available.

2. Hiring this overseer would solve several problems. Certainly animals must be fed and watered, but there is also a need to check them for illness and see that they get timely treatment from a veterinarian. This is something that you cannot do given the distance from your home to the property.
3. The issue of transporting an animal to the veterinarian or to a sale barn requires that you own a trailer or that an agreement is made with the overseer to use his trailer. Certainly there will be situations where animals must be transported for specific reasons.
4. You must also determine if you have a dependable water source for the animals. Shallow ponds may dry up in summer, and hauling water is not fun! The alternate is to supply well water, but the pump should be checked frequently unless water can be stored in a reservoir. Another option is to have a bigger and/or deeper pond dug. This is often desirable because ponds require little maintenance and are cheaper than cases where deep wells may have to be drilled. Custom well drillers often charge by the linear foot to drill the well and install a pump. The well depths range considerably throughout the county.
5. If you want animals, what type will you own? People often want exotic animals such as emus, ostriches and llamas. Unless your overseer is experienced with these animals, these are not good choices for absentee landowners. Others prefer to have buffalo on their property. These animals are extremely hard to contain in a fenced area. They would require a very well constructed fence to effectively contain them.
6. If you want to have horses, try to have mature, gentle ones. They tend to stay out of fences better than do young ones, and for that reason are less likely to be injured. If you have considerable money invested in the horses, it would be wise to use smooth wire rather than barbed for fencing. This will save on vet bills and the disappointment of having to put a good horse down that was so seriously cut by barbed wire that treatment and recovery may not be possible.
7. What is the forage potential on your land? Is it sufficient to sustain as many animals as you want to own? It's best to check with the Natural Resource Conservation Service in your area district to determine the proper stocking rate based on the amount of grass available and the class of animals that you intend to own. This will also save on unnecessary feed bills that would be required because of overstocking. Of course, some feed will be needed, but not as much if proper stocking rates are followed.
8. What about security? Out of the way places are sometimes the prime time for theft. Keep all gates locked, not only entrance gates, but also those in and around working pens. Make it as difficult as possible for thieves who want to load up your animals and drive off. Also, decide on an ownership brand for your livestock and register it at the courthouse. Brand each animal. By doing so your animals are more easily traced if they

are stolen.

9. If you want cows, are they going to be commercial cows or will you want registered animals? The latter requires fairly intense record keeping. This will obviously add to a weekend workload.
10. There may be the potential for other livestock species such as sheep and goats. This is true for those who won land in South or West Texas. In such a case, a hired overseer is a must to protect the animals from stray dogs and coyotes as well as feeding and caring for them.
11. Is there any wildlife on the land? If so there may be the potential to lease the hunting rights. Screen the lessee carefully and make sure they follow all game laws and are not given to shooting whatever moves. You certainly don't want to lose a cow or horse to someone who thought they were aiming at a deer. Unless you lease to someone who can personally oversee a day lease, your only option is to offer a season lease. The latter is much more tolerable to you as the landowner because you deal with fewer people of unknown character.
12. Is there a river, large pond or creek on the property suitable for lease fishing? This could be another income opportunity.
13. Another lease option is to contact some of the local bird watching groups. They often will pay for a field trip to your land. As non-traditional as that may sound, it can provide a source of income.
14. You need to meet your neighbors. Quality neighbors will often call you about things that may need attention due to your absence from the property. They also make good overseers.

Finally, if you choose to avoid having to make all these decisions, you can simply lease the grazing rights to your property. Such a case will still allow you to obtain **agricultural exemption** and help keep property taxes low. If you have purchased the property as an investment, the lease contract should probably be set up for annual renewal in order to free up the land in case of quick sale. Some leases will not accept such a short contract, but will accept longer (three or five years) contracts with the provision that they be given sufficient notice to vacate with a short grace period after sale. Also make sure that the lessee is responsible for incidental repairs. You may have to supply materials, but the lessee is customarily responsible for the labor. Without such provisions, your weekends may be spent in time consuming repairs.

This paper does not include any discussion on animal management, but you might wish to have access to such information. There are numerous ways to get information, but your tax dollars help pay for several sources such as the County Extension Agent, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Forestry Service and others. You can call the County Extension offices and have your name added to their mailing lists. By doing so, you will get timely information on management and educational activities that are free to the public. They often provide

educational programs in the areas of beef cattle management, horse care, gardening, horticulture, forage management, animal health and farming practices. County Extension Agents usually supply a newsletter regarding many of these subjects or have a weekly news column and radio show. Their offices also contain free written materials on the subjects listed above as well as material pertaining to human nutrition and family and consumer economics. County Extension offices are no further than a phone call away.

The Texas Cooperative Extension Service also provides training in herd management, financial management, and agricultural economics. These trainings are often provided locally, and some sessions are offered at the main campus of Texas A&M University in College Station. Information and registration regarding these particular sessions are also obtained through your local County Extension Agent.

The most important thing to decide is what you want from your property and if you are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to see that it happens. You are the only one that can make that decision. If you decide that the land should generate income, you probably need to hire an overseer if you cannot give the land enough personal attention.