

Straight to the Bottom Line

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Title: Fencing Pliers, Fence Stretchers and Soybean Meal

By: Steve Martin

Fence mending is a job that is never done. In our current world of steel pipe and cable it's hard to think back to wood posts, barbed wire and fence staples. Growing up though, when the day's task was done, and there was still daylight left, a fence project would complete the day. Through this process my dad and grandfather taught me the finer points of working with this frustrating and stiff barbed wire. There was a specific way to do it and if you did it wrong, it was certainly pointed out!

While at Auburn University, I had the opportunity to do a work study at the campus Beef Teaching Unit. On my first day, I was instructed to do some fence repair. My boss had moved to Auburn from Kansas State and his accent was a dead give-away. "He was not from around here", I said to myself. He showed me the farm's fencing tools. As I surveyed the various tools I did not see the familiar fencing pliers that were a key part of fence repair on our farm. There was a contraption that had a set of "teeth" on each end, notches along the length of it and a handle. He handed it to me and told me where to repair some broken strands of wire. Though embarrassed, I had to ask him to show me how to use this tool. I watched him use the teeth on each end to grab the broken ends of the wire. He cranked the lever to shorten the tool and thus stretch the slack out of the wire. I was impressed with how that worked but wondered how he would now join the two strands together. Next, he surprised me by connecting the wires with each in a "U" shape and then braided back on itself. With the tight stretch he had on that wire, and all off the pressure focused on that one point where each "U" met, it would break for sure.

At our farm, we were taught to always use only the braiding approach using fencing pliers. By overlapping at the point of the break you could then spread out the stress of the stretch over a length of wire. This was done after you had loosened the wire at the closest corner or brace post. Then, with the tandem of your fence pliers and a good claw hammer, you would stretch the wire around the brace post. It was all held tight using a fence staple nailed *behind* a barb. So, as we put the tools away that day in Auburn, I was quietly doubtful about the success of that wire splice. That was not at all the way we would have done it and I was sure it would fail.

In the following weeks, I kept my eye on that wire. After some time with the wire staying tight, I then waited for cold weather. "As it gets cold in the winter, the wire will contract, get shorter and that "U" connection will break for sure." When spring came, the fence was as good and tight as the day we fixed it. A lesson was learned for me, and not in the classroom, but at the beef unit with a boss from Kansas. There is almost always more than one way to do something and have it be successful.

Most of my years since that time at Auburn have been spent formulating rations for dairy animals. Over time, I have certainly developed some tendencies. Many of these are good and keep us leaning on past successes that reduce current risk. Others though, may end up limiting potential gains. I often think back about the fence stretcher at Auburn and wonder if the way I am doing something is the only way.

I encountered such a situation in the summer of 2013. We had a client that was milking very well going into the early summer. The ration was very well balanced and we were on top of everything. As we often do, we had two protein sources in the ration. Canola and soybean meal were both in the diet. There was a jump in soy prices about the same time this dairy was offered a very good deal on several rail cars of distressed canola pellets. At the urging of the dairy, I needed to find a way to remove the soy

to reduce feed cost. I struggled with my response. I must confess a bit of a love affair with soybean meal. It has been a key component of most of my rations for many years. I love it. My model loves it.

How much savings would be justified to go without the soy? Would we lose milk in this herd that was producing at previously unseen levels? I will just say the production number started with a 9. After a few days of contemplation, the dairy owner was convinced to move forward with only canola. I went to work in the ration model in an attempt to make it support the same milk as with the soy. What we ended up with was almost as good in the computer and significantly cheaper per cow. It was then a waiting game to see how the cows would respond to the change.

In much the same way as I watched that barbed wire so many years earlier, I watched daily milk production. I am pleased to say that milk only went up from there. I must be honest with you that this result surprised me and reminded me that just like there are two ways to repair fence, there are at least two ways to successfully feed a dairy cow.

This event has not made me turn my back on soybean meal, but it has reminded me that not all of our tendencies and personal biases are always best for every situation. Don't be too close-minded to try new things and approaches in the way we feed our cows. The beauty of the dairy cow is that she usually tells you pretty fast if you have made a good move. The best approach is to take your past successes, add a dose of technology, a few new ideas and a bunch of good cow sense and then just feed the cows.