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BeefTalk: Pounds Weaned Per Cow Exposed: An Important Production Trait

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As beef production becomes more sophisticated, a missing link, especially for cow-calf producers, is the lack of measurement tools for a big picture look at performance and data analysis.

There have been reams of discussion about data collection, yet the missing ingredient in the process has been how to use that information. North Dakota State University and the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association (NDBCIA) have joined forces to review data from 185,892 cows (from 1990 to 1998) exposed to bulls and processed through the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance System (CHAPS) record-keeping system from 1990 to 1998. This analysis includes benchmark values that give insight on performance trends.

But before we start evaluating these benchmarks, let's quickly review the two main purposes of beef performance data.

The first is to monitor and separate the genetic and managerial impacts on cattle within a producer's herd. These data are used extensively in genetic evaluation programs to estimate the direction of genetic change and allow for cow culling, heifer selection and bull buying. Breed associations routinely supply this information to producers and buyers of bulls within a respective breed.

The second purpose is to appraise cow herd productivity through changes in overall cow herd output for the past

year or years. These evaluations monitor total production and management and do not attempt to produce genetic evaluations. In simple terms, this is the report card for the herd.

The NDBCIA and CHAPS have focused on this second purpose to give NDBCIA member evaluations for both individual animals and the entire herd. These evaluations help producers make management decisions.

Ultimately, producers need to answer this question: Do my management strategies and selected cattle actually perform at expected levels? The NDBCIA and CHAPS provide performance measurement tools and strategies for using them that help producers answer that question.

Since 1963, the NDBCIA has been collecting performance cattle records and analyzing data. A review of the CHAPS data reveals some interesting statistical trends that have implications for the performance and economics of cow-calf operations.

Now that you know a little about the background of the NDBCIA and CHAPS, welcome to BeefTalk. In the following weeks, I will share many of these benchmarks and trends with you. For example, the accompanying chart indicates the average actual weaning weight of calves and pounds weaned per cow exposed from 1990 to 1998.

For both traits, the peak years were 1992 and 1993, and these traits have declined since then. Non adjusted calf weaning weights reached 587.7 pounds in 1993 with 523.3 pounds weaned per cow exposed. Since 1993, pounds weaned per cow exposed has declined to a low of 460.9 pounds weaned per cow exposed in 1997. The downward trend was reversed in 1998.

Many reasons could account for this change, however, more importantly, do you know what your herd trends are for weaning weight and pounds weaned per cow exposed? Do you know which direction you are heading? The average CHAPS producer has given up 20,780 pounds of weaned calf per 100 cows exposed in the five years since the peak in 1993. Perhaps 523 pounds was not sustainable. However, for successful producers changes in direction need to be planned, not the result of random events.

Join me next week as we continue to discuss the beef world as seen through CHAPS. Your comments are always welcome at www.beeftalk.com.

May you find all your ear tags.

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For more information, contact the NDBCIA office, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 Phone: (701)483-2045, or go to www.beeftalk.com on the Internet. In correspondence, refer to this column as BT001.

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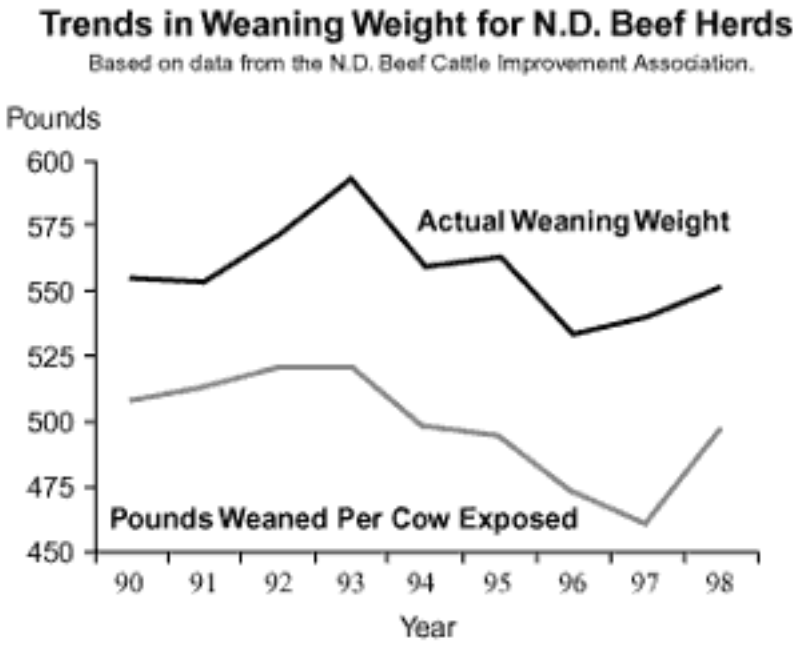

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