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BeefTalk: Producers Can't Manage What They Don't Measure

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A phrase from my former co-worker, Harlan Hughes is especially appropriate as another fall comes upon us.

I'm not sure where he came up with the phrase, "You can't manage what you don't measure." I have heard that phrase for several years, and as we prepare for another weaning season I certainly hope producers will not bypass the opportunity to record in writing factual data regarding their beef operation.

Not to date myself, but in the fall of 1975, following graduation from North Dakota State University, I weighed my first calves in Ramsey county for the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association. So after twenty five years of encouraging producers to "measure what they need to manage," I can quickly reference many herds that excel in beef production. These herds enter the new millennium positioned to take financial advantage of the current up-turn in beef demand and subsequent opportunity for increased positive net returns in the beef business.

So why don't some producers record and track individual cow/calf data? I'm sure the reasons are many. Time and cost are probably at the top of the list.

Fall is roundup time. The colored TV and magazine stories imply everyone gets to sit down and enjoy a smooth early morning cup of coffee, ride a smooth horse, sing a tune like "Get Along Little Doggies" and have the cattle all in and processed in time for a little story telling as the sun sets.

Under those conditions, I would have no trouble putting that scale in the chute and collecting the performance data needed to evaluate the cows. But let's take a look at reality. Today, many producers have cattle spread 30 to 50 miles from one pasture to the next, many times even farther depending on the price and availability of grass. For us, cattle work days mean the crew is loading horses by 5 a.m. and, depending on the pasture, actually rounding up cattle by 6 or 7 a.m.

If all the cows are actually where they are supposed to be, the cows should be arriving just as the chute setup is being completed, the electronic scale calibrated, and the day's objectives reviewed. If all goes well, the cattle should be worked by noon with semi trucks loaded full of this years high-valued calves destined for the weaning lots and the mother cows turned back to grass until time permits to bring them home.

Loading calves is just plain work, unloading calves isn't any easier.

Once the calves are at the ranch, bunks need to be full of an excellent palatable preconditioning ration, easily found water fountains full and every possible exterior gate and fence sealed. By the time the horses are unloaded and cared for, several forgotten muscles will remind the producer that, yes, today I weaned the calves.

If you are going to do it right, weaning calves is hard work, and many days don't go exactly as planned. Bad weather, mechanical breakdowns, temperamental cattle and tired crews don't help. I have shared in this scenario for 25 years. Those 1975 calves weighed 469 pounds, the fall of 2000 calves will weigh in excess of 600 pounds.

As a former Dunn county extension agent would say, "You know what, you still can't manage what you don't measure," and I believe him.

May you find all your ear tags.

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