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BeefTalk: Sound Sorting Makes Good Sense In Beef Management

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Late fall is the time cows need to be at home--and we never have enough pens to sort them. Familiar faces line the feed bunks and thoughts turn from last year's calves to preparation for next year's arrivals.

The first thoughts are how to get those thin cows away from the mob and find a spot where we can give them and young cows a little extra attention. For those who start calving March 1, Dec. 1 marks the beginning of the last trimester of gestation and brings a significant increase in nutritional needs. During the middle third of gestation, producers often leave cows to fend for themselves.

As the last trimester of pregnancy approaches, the days of the blue-light feed special are over and producers need to prepare these cows for calving. Least cost rations are appropriate, but not at the expense of nutritional deficiencies. (As a side note, the average calving date for North Dakota is April 1, so most producers still have three or four weeks to get serious about winter nutrition.)

At the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center, calving starts March 1. Our time is up. I am always amazed how quickly the third trimester of pregnancy gets here. As we prepare for the last trimester, I

appreciate the well-prepared preconditioning nutritional packages that are available to producers. They save time, an element of that we always run short of.

Our sort date on the whole cow herd is Dec. 5. Last year's calves are scheduled to ship to the feed yard Dec. 12, so November and early December are always congested.

This will be the final sort for cull cows. The herd will be split by condition score and age. Feeding these groups (moderate versus light condition and old versus young) separately assures adequate nutrition to all the cows. Most producers seem to refer to the cows as the herd. In reality, that herd is split into many age groups that are often overlooked.

Typically, cows enrolled in the Cow Herd Appraisal and Performance Software program average 5.4 years of age. That number has not dramatically changed over the last couple of decades. In 1998 the cow herd averaged 5.4 years of age with a 20 percent replacement rate and 17.9 percent culling rate, resulting in a slight increase in the cow herd size.

So what does this mean in terms of the distribution of the cow herd?

Over the last 20 years, the typical herd of 100 cows had 17 first-calf heifers, 15 second-calf heifers, 13 4-year-olds, 11 5-year-olds, 10 6-year-olds, nine 7-year-olds, eight 8-year-olds, six 9-year-olds, five 10-year-olds, three 11-year-olds, two 12-year-olds, and one cow that is 13 or older.

In order to meet each group's needs, the following pen scheme is recommended:

- Pen 1--a separate pen for the 17 first calf heifers.
- Pen 2 -- cows 10 years old and older, plus the second calf heifers, and any other thin cows (condition score 4 and under).
- Pen 3-- the rest of the cow herd.

It seems easy to acknowledge that 17 percent of the cow herd (more if you have a high replacement rate) are too young to compete and are separated. We often forget that 11 percent of the herd is too old to compete and 15

percent of the herd is still recovering from their first and second calving experience.

After doing the math, the second sort pen of cows is 26 percent of the herd before any thin cows are sorted into it. These cows need the extra attention and nutrition to enhance their long term stay in the herd.

Happy sorting.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.COM on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0014.

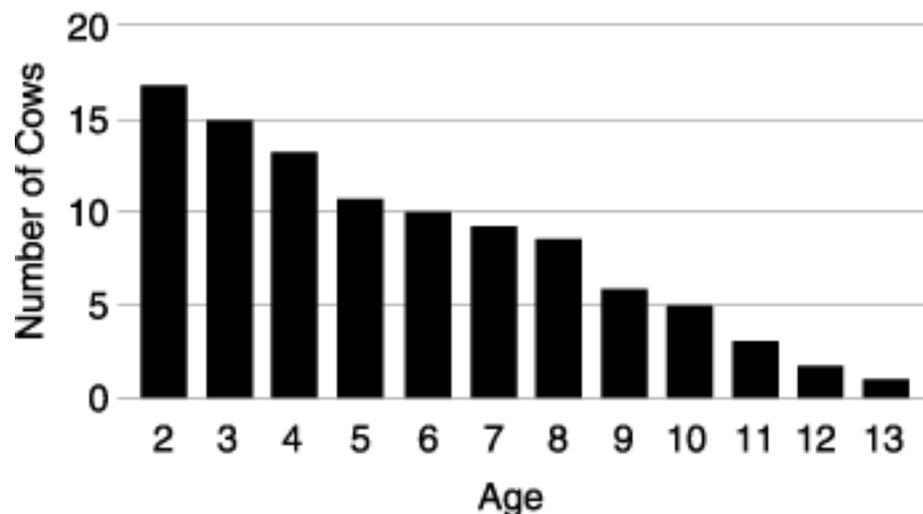
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Cow Age Distribution

Typical 100-cow Herd



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