

NEWS

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BeefTalk: Calving Reflections

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Be part of the solution, not part of the problem. This axiom fits well in today's cow-calf business as producers review how the calving season went.

Not long ago the cows were calving, the temperature was cold and the mud was deep. Experience would say that you do not want to ask managers how calving is then, because the response would be less than objective, reflecting bone-chilling cold and not enough sleep.

If you wait too long, perhaps until this fall, time will have mellowed most of the events and one soon has difficulty matching a calving season with particular problems. Now is perhaps the best time to make a few notes on what to change for next year.

The first step is to list the dead calves. Hopefully, your cattle are in a record system that will provide that information. If not, grab a piece of paper and pencil and list the calves.

Your calving notebook should have the dead calves checked off and a brief notation on what happened to each. Until all the calves are listed, the shock of lost opportunities has not had its full impact. For 2001 spring calving, the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center's list has 23 calves on it.

Currently, the CHAPS five year rolling average for percentage of calf death is 4.4 percent. The death losses for the previous decade were: 2.7 percent in 1990; 3.0 percent in 1991; 3.7 percent in 1992; 4.5 percent in 1993; 3.8 percent in 1994; 4.0 percent in 1995; 4.2 percent in 1996; 5.5 percent in 1997; 2.8 percent in 1998; 3.5 percent in 1999; and 2.5 percent in 2000. The spring blizzard of 1997 resulted in the greatest calf death loss and the decade started with the lowest death loss.

The 23 calf deaths at the center divided by 434 cows exposed is 5.3 percent, almost 1 percent above the benchmark. The death loss at the center for each year during the last decade was 2.3 percent in 1990; 5.2 percent in 1991; 3.8 percent in 1992; 4.2 percent in 1993; 4.4 percent in 1994; 1.8 percent in 1995; 2.4 percent in 1996; 11.6 percent in 1997; 5.2 percent in 1998; 7.1 percent in 1999; and 6.6 percent in 2000. Ever since the tough winter of 1997, the Center's death loss rate has been greater than the benchmark values.

The resolution to the problem involves a look at data, but we have to be careful not to look too deep. Eleven of the 23 calves died at birth. The other 12 calves died from a variety of things: clostridia, ulcers, starvation,

accidents, etc. Basically, there was no real pattern. Dead calves at birth, with no clinical disease, would tend to be related to calving difficulty. A mix of several problems would imply overcrowding or problems in cow/calf pair management or lot conditions during the 14 days following birth -- commonly called stress.

At the center, our focus is to review the general management during the first 14 days after calving and note if any particular cow management group or bull is causing stress or pushing birth weights too high. As with most operations, any managerial change to alleviate stress on the cow/calf pairs should reduce calf mortality.

I wish the initial review of the Center's calf death loss was positive. It wasn't, and action needs to be taken. In reviewing the dead calves at birth, six of them were born to first-calf heifers, strongly suggesting a birth weight problem. Further review of problems is needed. From these reviews, we can make changes for next spring. Stay tuned for more evaluation and changes that we implement.

As with any data collection, the key is to use the data to produce positive change in the operation. Pretending a problem doesn't exist only strengthens the problem, not the solution.

May you find all your ear tags.

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 BT0041.

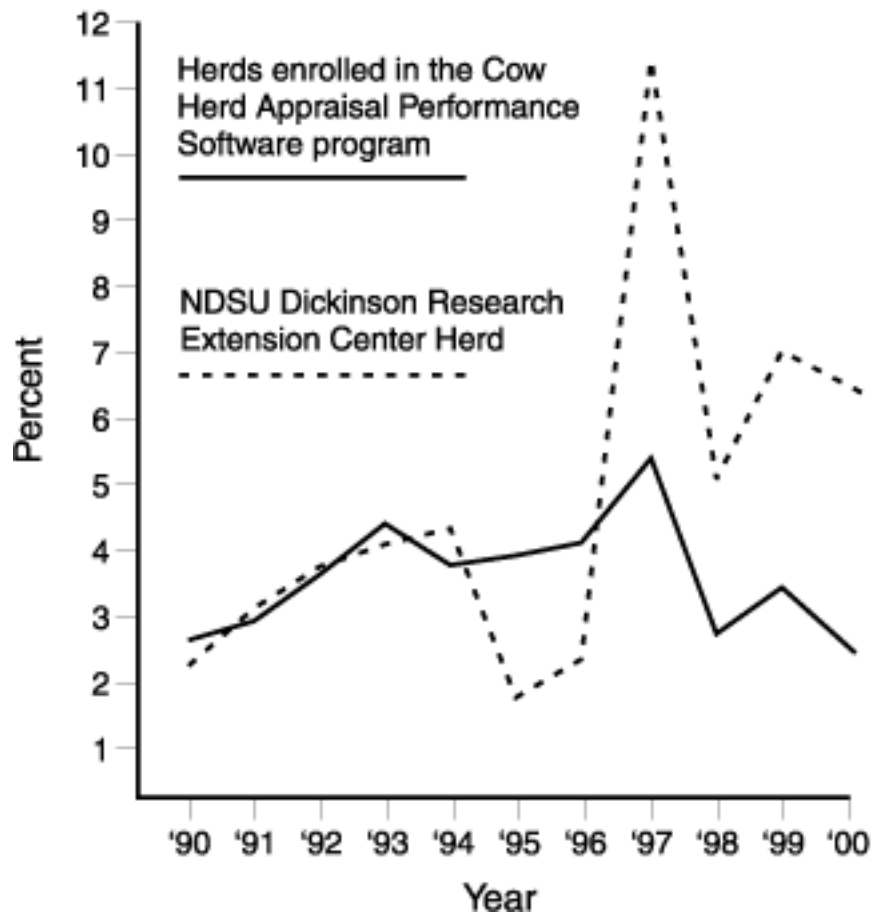
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Annual Calf Death Loss

% Death loss is calves lost/cows exposed



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