

A Bird in the Hand Is Worth Two in the Bush, Maybe

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Generally, the fall rush to wean calves comes as a result of a good blast from Mother Nature. This year, however, is different. It is not old man winter knocking on the door that is driving the calves off the pastures into the sale barn.

As is normal this time of year, the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center focuses on preconditioning or weaning. When the Center is short calves, the neighborhood, or at least the region, has plenty of calves available. This year, the pickings are slim: lots of calves but many are committed to video sales, upcoming sale lots or are simply already sold.

Most often, short grass and high prices drove the calves to town straight off the cows. Despite the efforts of managing retained ownership programs and preconditioning efforts, the old saying "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" seems to be the story this year for cattle producers.

The North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association records show producers with early-calving herds have worked, processed calves and sent weights in an average of 15 days sooner than last year. At the same time, this year's calves have shown an ability to put on gain that is similar to previous year's, but because of age, the calves are lighter.

In 2002, the average daily gain was 2.49 pounds per day, while this year's calves are gaining at 2.51 pounds per day. Translated into 205-day weights, the 2002 calves averaged 628 pounds at seven months of age, and the calves processed so far this year have a projected 627 pound weight at seven months of age. In essence, two very similar years seem to be stacking up in regards to calf performance coming through the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS) program administered by the NDBCIA.

For gross dollars, the answer would weigh in on this year's calves. Last year's actual processing weight was

557 pounds, while this year's calves are crossing the scale at 521 pounds, 36 pounds lighter than last year. Don't forget, the calves are 15 days younger.

I suppose, it is hard to argue against the thought that "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" but forethought, current thought and afterthought always need to be processed to fully evaluate management decisions.

On a recent sale at Stockmen's Livestock in Dickinson, N.D., steers weighing 557 pounds or more brought about \$110 per hundredweight, while cattle weighing 521 pounds or more brought roughly \$115 per hundredweight. In evaluating the decision to sell two weeks early, forfeiting 36 pounds of calf weight cost the producer just over \$13. In other words, selling calves at the 557 pounds at \$110 brought \$612, while selling at 521 pounds at \$115 resulted in a gross receipt of \$599.

The old term "risk" starts blinking not only on the computer monitor but in one's stomach as well. Probably producing a need for an antacid with each blink. Recently, prices moved up as calves got heavier and gross dollars got bigger. That's not usually the case. Normally, as calves get heavier, the market goes down and any major move in the market eliminates the last two weeks of potential profit. The conclusion to that story is "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

Perhaps this is one of the those years where going hunting isn't such a bad idea. If you are not feeding cattle, all those pheasants aren't going to have much picking at the trough, so you might as well shoot them. Maybe, three birds in the hand are worth a lot more than a flock on the run.

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 BT0166.

CHAPS Calf Performance

	2002	2003
Average daily gain	2.49 lbs.	2.51 lbs.
205 day adjusted weight	628 lbs.	627 lbs.
Actual processing weight	557 lbs.	521 lbs.
Processing age	189 days	174 days