

New Words for an Old Business; Brace Yourself

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The cattle business is considered mature in many respects, but maturity does not imply an absence of change. The Dickinson Research Extension Center (DREC) recently invited several individuals in to review and discuss the current state of animal waste systems.

In particular, the DREC needs to address the situation, not only from a research perspective, but also from the pure management view. Research centers also are production units that need to follow the rules of play.

Federal and state governments or a local governing board generally sets these rules. What was interesting about the discussion and perhaps very indicative of where the world is going was the array of terms discussed. A normal cow-calf operation certainly would have a well-thought-out plan for feeding the cowherd and managing it through calving.

A typical discussion may involve the feeding method, hay quality or perhaps the addition of grain in the ration. If something like grain is fed, then how should it be fed and where would the feed bunks be located? Water placement would be critical, especially as the cattle head into the Northern winter winds. This all sounds generic and are common discussion points for an afternoon of cow talk.

At the review, none of these points even surfaced. A completely new list of terms for today's cow-calf producer was brought up. Critical to the placement of a cowherd in today's environment are issues such as water runoff and manure analysis. These new terms percolate through the discussion, broadening the discussion beyond just the immediate location of the cows.

Last week, the definition of an animal feeding operation (AFO) was noted. AFOs include cows and calves that remain in one location for more than 45 days throughout the year and affect the normal growth of desirable plants. How many winter-feeding yards produce an excellent crop of weeds the next summer? That makes your location an AFO and means you need to determine if you need a permit from the Department of Health to operate your existing cow-calf enterprise. That statement causes some to cough.

There is no grandfather clause. What you see is what you will be. The discussion moved on with more questions. Is the location of the winter-feeding grounds impacting ground water or air quality? What is the effect of compaction? Do all those cows and calves compact the soil such that springtime plant growth is inhibited? What about pathogens or antibiotic residues? Is there any indication the nitrogen cycle is impacted?

If a cowherd has the potential to affect the environment, a permit will be required, along with appropriate managerial or facility changes, to assure the environmental impact is negligible. Not only the physical aspects of the cow-calf operation entered the discussion. The plans to accommodate waste removal also need to be evaluated.

What is the nutrient availability of the manure and how should it be composted and spread on designated fields? Is there enough land to accommodate the volume of waste produced? Are there compositing sites available?

If the word "runoff" came up, the next series of discussions centered on the need for adequate retaining dikes for composting sites and good grazing and cropping systems to assure appropriate utilization of the waste once applied to the fields. Perhaps precision agricultural techniques need to be evaluated.

A heavy sigh! Whatever happened to feeding hay bales and just watching the cows eat?

Do you know what a VAPS is? More next time.

May you find all your NAIS-approved 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 BT0257.

This May Be You -

In North Dakota, cow-calf operators need to be aware that a large, Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) must obtain a permit from the North Dakota Department of Health by December 31, 2006. If a cow-calf operation is defined as a medium or small Animal Feeding Operation (AFO) a permit application will be required to the North Dakota Department of Health by July 1, 2008.

Source: Assessment Tool for New or Existing Animal Feeding Operations, Bridget Johnson and Ron Wiederholt, Area Livestock Nutrient Management Specialists for the NDSU Extension Service, NM-1284.