

BeefTalk 793: Good Cattle-working Facilities Should be a High Priority

Producers need to plan ahead for cattle-working days and invest in good, secure cattle-working facilities.

Much debate surrounds this question: “How many times should a cow be in a chute?”

The answer rests with the objectives of each management structure. Yet, setting aside the concept of survival of the fittest, producers do need to gain access to individual cows at some point.

Some producers have corrals but no defined working facilities and no chutes; thus, the cows never enter a chute. Other producers gather cows once, when separating the current year’s calf crop, and the cows may not see the chute.

In fact, some might say once is too many, and you should sort calves off as convenient.

Generally, cows that need to be culled need to be sorted. Many cattle producers gather cows and calves, wean, pregnancy check, sort and send the cows back to pasture or winter paddocks. Producers who vaccinate their cows put the cows through the chute prior to breeding and perhaps prior to calving.

As pairs are moved to summer pasture, the calves may be worked, but generally, the cows are not run through a chute. Producers using artificial insemination may work the cow two, three or more times, depending on the synchronization schedule utilized and how a producer handles the cleanup breeding.

So, depending on management, cows may come into a chute zero to six times a year: once for weaning and pregnancy checking, twice for vaccinations and three times for breeding.

At the Dickinson Research Extension Center, cattle are worked quite frequently because we need to collect data for research projects. But, as the center has shifted from intensive cattle production to extensive cattle production, certain managerial questions arise. The first question for the purpose of general management is: “How often are the cows gathered?”

One driving point, herd health, requires the cows to be in the chute twice a year. Essentially, mature cows should have a pre-calving vaccination protocol as well as a pre-breeding vaccination protocol, with both dates dependent on the calving season.

For the center, bull turnout is Aug. 1, with a May 10 expected start of the calving season. The mature cows receive pre-calving vaccinations in late March and pre-breeding vaccinations in early to mid-July. The early to mid-July vaccination coincides with pasture rotation as the cows finish their first rotation off a twice-over grazing system. This timing allows for appropriate time prior to bull turnout, according to the vaccine label.

The third time the cows would be in the chutes at the center would be the conclusion of the summer grazing twice-over system in mid- to late October. For most cattle producers, this time would be an opportunity to process the calves and weigh, condition score and pregnancy check the cows. For some herds, calves are weaned at this time, but for many herds, the cows and calves simply are returned to a late-fall pasture such as crop aftermath, and the calves are weaned at a later date.

The center has switched from a November weaning date to a mid-December weaning date for the 2- and 3-year-old cows (cows with their first or second calf) and a mid-January weaning date for the older, more mature cows. We hope this will give calves an introduction to winter alongside their mothers, and time to adjust to the colder weather and increase their willingness to readily consume harvested forage.

Another advantage is labor. With May-born calves, traditional weaning in November increases the labor requirement. When freshly weaned calves are not sold directly at weaning, owner responsibility for care greatly increases. By delaying weaning until after the holidays and into mid-January, the labor fit is better.

Some even would say we could go longer, but the center has the facilities to bring calves home for three-plus months for 1 to 1.5 pounds per day gain from forage diets prior to going out to crested wheatgrass the first of May. The target is to have steers on the rail at 22 months of age and breed yearling heifers in August. Both goals are achievable on forage-based diets.

The bottom line: Producers need to plan ahead for cattle-working days, even in extensive beef operations, and make an investment in good, secure cattle-working facilities. If cow-calf operations have an obvious weakness, it oftentimes is that the working facilities are simply not sufficient.

Actually, the discussion of working cows is irrelevant if facilities don't exist. Perhaps, given the good calf prices the last couple of years, investing in cattle facilities would be a good choice. It is good for the cattle and the people who work the cattle.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

