



BeefTalk 619: How Many Cows Are in the Pen?

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

The Center's Goal

Evaluate and reduce the cost of production while improving production and marketing efficiency.

When done correctly, databases can be developed that provide producers with answers to their questions as they look to change their operations.

An interesting question: How many cows are in the pen? Do we know?

Perhaps the question seems out of place, but, as the Dickinson Research Extension Center shifts to May calving and grass

beef production, the center needs to position itself to have the answers to the many questions that are associated with the change.

The process is a lot like during the 1990s when the integrated resource management programing efforts were being offered by many universities involved with beef cattle efforts and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA).

At that time, a standardized production analysis program was developed for an in-depth evaluation of cattle operations. The purpose of the program was to assist producers in evaluating and reducing their cost of production while improving their production and marketing efficiency.

Although the program is still on the NCBA website, summary results seem to be harder to obtain than when the program was front and center. Interestingly, the process certainly brought out the strong desire to review fiscal and production aspects of beef cattle operations, but the difficulty of obtaining the input data was challenging for many producers.

Simple discussions, such as "How many cows are in the pen?" became problematic, particularly when the monthly fluctuations of cattle inventories soon turned the question to "What date do you want?" There now were multiple answers to the same question.

Using a little math, if a producer is going to determine costs per cow, multiple answers mean confused data.

For example, total annual herd costs are \$250,000, but the producer has 500 cows in March and 600 cows in June. Is the answer \$500 per cow or \$417 per cow in costs? Unfortunately, producers have abandoned more intensive data programs. In some cases, this makes comparing various management options difficult.



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Gross numbers are available, but the tweaking of those numbers to compare appropriate management questions risks making improper conclusions or making the wrong choice. So, as the center moves forward with change, the documentation of that change needs to move with it. Unfortunately, resources are limited and not all questions can be answered.

In some cases, as in this case, the center cannot provide data that measures financial or production efficiency for cattle calving at different times of the year because the herd is not big enough. These kinds of questions often are best answered by wider industry-based data sets that can be analyzed properly.

Even then, there is extreme difficulty in coming up with appropriate answers when herds are not randomized through all the months of the years and herd locality often is confounded with calving season and other management practices associated with individual producers.

However, problems with data will not prohibit the center from moving forward with change and redefining the center's management. In this case, the many managerial questions can be asked, data collected and analyzed based on cows calving in May.

This leaves open the question on whether March or May is the best calving season. At least, those costs that are associated with May calving can be documented and management practices relevant to May calving can be evaluated.

For example, yearling performance on grass from two different cow sizes can be evaluated. Reproductive and rebreeding performance of cows bred in August can be evaluated based on potential treatments. Heifer development can be evaluated on slower winter gain and summer grass.

The questions are many and the answers still distant. However, more importantly, when done correctly, databases can be developed that provide producers with answers to their questions as they look to change their operations.

Interestingly and certainly one of the joys of writing a column such as BeefTalk, I am privileged to receive many comments and suggestions about the beef industry. Unfortunately, the data often is not available to respond.

The center's role, as with other universities and those that are in the pursuit of knowledge, is to seek out definable answers that become our best estimate of what these management changes mean to the bottom line within the ranch operation.

At that point, recommendations are stronger and one knows that the advice is good. In reality, until one can answer "How many cows are in the pen?" the denominator is in question and so is the answer.

Some great and exciting times are ahead in the beef industry, and the center certainly is enjoying the change. Ultimately, the center will evaluate and reduce the cost of production, while also improving production and marketing efficiency.

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.

