BeefTalk 686: Sending Spayed Heifers to the Feedlot

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Yearling Heifer Inventory

Dickinson Research Extension Center

Total Spring Yearling Heifers	102
Heifers kept for replacements	25
Heifers spayed and sent to grass	77
Total Fall Yearling Heifers	102
Current Spayed and Open	83
Current Bred inventory	19

Given the need to expand cow numbers, sending a load of spayed heifers to the feedlot seems somewhat contrary to the needs of the industry.

The spayed heifers are off the grass and ready for the feedlot. The Dickinson Research Extension Center spayed all the extra heifers and sent them to grass at the end of May and returned them home in mid-October.

They just broke 2 pounds a day of average daily gain on grass and are heading to the feedlot at 940 pounds. The center had 102 yearling heifers last spring. After selecting 25 replacement heifers, 77 were spayed and sent to grass. Of the 25 replacement heifers, 19 were diagnosed as pregnant. The remaining six also were spayed and added to the grass heifers. The six open heifers meant the center had an open rate of 24 percent. Not the best, but it is what it is.

Of the 19 pregnant heifers, 15 were bred in the first 21 days (79 percent) and the remaining four were bred during the second 21-day cycle. Because the center has switched to May calving, the bulls are put out for just two cycles. Essentially, it is a 42-day calving period. This gets all the calves on the ground in the spring before mid-June.

The cows have cycled well, and with weaning coming up, the pregnancy data will be calculated soon. The hope is that the pregnancy numbers from previous years will happen again this year.

This has been a different year because of the constant rainfall and opportunity for grass growth. However, fall roundup issues have occurred because of the wet conditions. The trails are wet, pastures soggy and pens messy. This is quite a contrast because the biggest concern most years is dust pneumonia.

Given the need to expand the cow numbers, sending a load of spayed heifers to the feedlot seems somewhat contrary to the needs of the industry. However, heifers born in May and June do not compete well in the fall as potential replacement heifers because of their smaller size.

As difficult as it may seem, and given the more than occasional statement that producers have a desire to limit cow size, when it comes to selling replacement heifers, size still sells. Those heifers that come in behind a set of large heifers just do not seem to look as attractive.

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When it comes to marketing, the other issue with May and June calving is that the vast majority of producers still calf in March and April. Heifers born in May and June will not be ready to breed at the time the majority of producers need to breed their heifers, so spaying is a good option.

Another issue that probably is the most convincing is that intact heifers make poor grass calves. Once puberty is reached and the heifers start to cycle, it is inevitable that a neighbor's bull is going to get in the pasture, so open heifers soon become bred heifers. That is not acceptable because there is no good outcome for feedlot heifers that are bred. Even in the best situation, the potential calving issues are risky, so spay those heifers that are not intended for replacement.

Along the line of "you can't teach an old dog new tricks," many producers consider spaying a heifer a complicated procedure. However, the veterinary community is well-trained, and neutering procedures routinely are performed on bull and heifer calves. Like any professional technique, if your local veterinarian does not spay heifers, he or she certainly would be happy to recommend a veterinarian who does.

This is the first set of heifers the center has fed, so the data will be interesting. The steer counterparts to the center's heifers have been summered on grass and have performed well in the feedlot following grass.

The center's steers have been divided into a feedlot only, pasture only or pasture with the addition of late-season annual crops. Although the heifers have grazed on pasture only, they gained comparably to the steers that only were on pasture the previous two years. The heifers actually gained slightly more than 2 pounds a day. Meanwhile, the steers that only were on grass were under 2 pounds of gain per day.

Although this is not a direct comparison, the opportunity for spayed heifers to grow on grass is good. At least in the North Country, heifers are routinely thought of as replacements. They generally are subjected to a thought process that has all the heifers treated as replacements to select the best replacements.

Unfortunately, along with that thought is an acceptance that market heifers are less valuable than the market steers. There are some real reasons that steers will bring more than heifers, but that does not mean producers should not prepare market heifers right and seek top dollar. At least in the center's first experience, spaying heifers is working.

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.