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NDSU Extension Service

BeefTalk: Positive Economic Benefits Possible by Studying Numbers

By Kris Ringwall, Extension Beef Specialist,

Do you ever look at numbers, just to look?

Successful beef managers review numbers in different ways to stimulate thoughts and produce positive results. One example is the cost of stress at weaning time. How much potential gain do calves lose when stress levels are high? At the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center, each year the calves go on various research trials, which have a standard procedure. Is there a cost associated with working up to the start of a trial or shipping the calves?

There is misconception among individuals who don't have the opportunity to physically work cattle very often. They feel weaning is a morning event

followed by lunch and the opportunity to bond while breathing good, fresh air. Yet, the economics of the beef business tells us otherwise. For us, weaning is a week-long activity of moving, trucking, sorting and processing cattle.

Cow and calf pairs may be across the road, down the road a mile or two or in the next township. In the spring, pairs are dispersed to the farthest corners of the ranch and slowly brought toward headquarters as the grazing season progresses. By the fall roundup, most of the cows are close enough to trail the herd to the processing facility.

The cattle drive gives the riders, horses and cattle a chance to become acquainted. Once at the facility, cows and calves are parted and sorted. Cows are staged, in anticipation of being reworked the following week. Calves are weighed, processed and penned.

As the sun sets, a late-night load of feed is delivered to each calf pen. The sound of the tractor is overcome by the loud bellowing of homesick calves. Early the next day, the steps are repeated with another group of cows and calves, and again the third and fourth days.

Responsibilities shift as the lots fill up and choring takes longer as the need to constantly watch for sick calves fills up the days. As a point of interest, calf 1044, brought off pasture prior to weaning, is still in the sick pen. That's one of the difficult calves. The opportunity for profit has long since disappeared, but animal husbandry still abounds.

Meanwhile, the cow pen has filled to overflowing and cows need to be processed and sent back out to winter facilities. Cows are systematically evaluated for physical soundness, condition of their teeth, temperament

and pregnancy status. Those that don't make the cut are sorted off and the rest are sent to winter programs.

Options abound: sell now, don't sell, put some weight on those culls, add some pounds to the second cut calves, send the first cut calves to the neighbors, put good heifers in pen one, the light weight heifers in two, keep a pen open for the sick calves, the bulls just jumped into the replacement heifers. Darn, I forgot where the replacements even were. This is not the time to offer frivolous advice to the seasoned cow hand. There is only so much any one person can do and still maintain sanity. Yes, I could make more money with option two than option one, but frankly, I just don't have the time. Is it any wonder why the cattle industry is steeped in tradition?.

Well any way, I started out wondering, "How much weight do calves lose during the weaning process?" Generally, calf weight loss during weaning is simply accepted as a part of business. But how much is too much?

Our calves weighed an average of 89 pounds at birth, 573 pounds at pre-weaning vaccination, 638 pounds at weaning and 638 pounds five to seven days after weaning. From a manager's view point, I lost a week's gain on the whole calf crop. A gain of 2.2 pounds per day per calf pre-weaning on 347 calves for six days amounts to 4,560 pounds of lost weight gain. A dead calf is easy to see, but improved management during the weaning process is just as important. Finding hidden loss is the manager's pay.

May you find all your 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 BT0067.

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Average Calf Weight Gain From Birth to 5-7 days Post Weaning	
Number of calves	284
Average birth weight	89 lbs
Average weight at pre-weaning vaccination	573 lbs
Weaning weight	638 lbs
Average age at weaning	246 days
Weight 5-7 days post weaning	638 lbs
Gain during weaning	0 lbs
Average daily gain from birth to weaning	2.2 lbs

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