
The Future of the Beef Business Involves Records on Total Herd Performance

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



The hot winds and parching environment is hanging on, and much of the area is struggling for moisture. I even noticed people are starting to look a little dehydrated.

The cow and calf, however, were designed to survive in this weather. The stretch from 110 F to minus 40 F must have been a challenge for the inventor. And, just to ensure survival, that inventor added and subtracted 10 degrees to make sure survival was part of the plan.

In today's beef industry, it's not just the physical environment that faces extremes. Today it takes a plan along with appropriate documentation through records to withstand the tremendous give and take within the environment and the industry. Those who do not keep adequate records function from feel rather than knowledge. The days are past--and frankly not coming back--when dips in total performance could be tolerated. Total beef herd performance is not up for debate, only discussion.

So what do we look for in a total performance herd? In discussion with some office visitors the other day, we bounced around that same generic question. In response, the key elements of balance, common sense and good all round cattle surfaced. At least for the commercial cattleman, no particular point will assure survival, nor will not doing something assure failure.

Successful managers tend to balance the environment with genetics to assure a suitable outcome. I recently received a note from a long-time cattle producer indicating some points to success. Before retiring, Bill Stegner was an active member of the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association. He used cattle to harvest the local environment and focused on all salable products, not just steer calves.

So often the discussion focuses on the steer calf, leaving the other profit centers out to dry. Total herd performance is balancing all the various enterprises within a herd to their maximum, at which point you reach optimum profitability. I am often asked about the advantages of buying cows from a successfully performing herd. I indicate those

herds are certainly an excellent source of cattle, however you can't buy the owner or manager.

Stegner developed a management protocol that fit his operation. His sales enhanced all of his heifer calves, cull cows and calves. He used only proven bulls, resulting in uniformity within females, allowing for the sale of bred heifers and bred cows while maintaining herd numbers. Those open cows and heifers needing to be sold were grain fed prior to sale, and Stegner retained ownership in all calves.

By using local grains, grain byproducts, straw and hay as raw resources, Stegner utilized the cattle to add value to them. It was this formula that brought him success. Through the years, the options to retain ownership allowed for profit from good cattle to be returned to a good manager. Stegner said, "There is no doubt in my mind that retained ownership of a lifetime in the cattle business has been a large success."

So often, as producers, our view is sometimes narrow or we chase someone else's concept. Instead, we should build our model to fit, and do as Stegner did in the cow calf business. The money is in adding value to your own raw resources, not in chasing someone else's dream. The cow can be, and is, a money making machine. But as Mr. Stegner did, focus, understand your resources and add value by using the best-fitting cattle genetics you can. And, finally, market without mercy.

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 BT0158.

“**I**t takes extra time and work to do the book keeping, but with these records I know what my sires are doing, what the cattle are doing. I know what cows to keep and which ones to sell. There’s no guesswork.”

Bill Stegner