

Herd Nutrition is the Foundation of the Cow Herd

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



There are images that really never leave the mind. They can be good or bad, but they leave a nonerasable spot and, given the appropriate stimulus, return immediately.

These images are stored within us and cannot be shared, sent or deleted as we are used to doing in this modern computer age. I was reminded of this phenomenon when I saw a young cow standing under a mesquite tree on a hot summer day in Texas.

The cow was so thin that today's condition scores could not account for the almost total absence of flesh. She was just standing quietly under the shade of the mesquite tree, allowing her newborn calf a chance to suckle.

I am not sure why that permanent image exists in my mind. I surmise that it may be because the cow didn't look like she had been fed. Yet, on the contrary, there was no indication of discontentment in the image. It just was a young cow nursing her calf.

The return of this image was triggered by a review of the publication titled "Priorities First: Identifying Management Priorities in the Commercial Cow-Calf Business." This piece was authored and summarized by Tom Field, Ph.D., Fort Collins, Colo.

Field noted the No. 1 priority for commercial producers is herd nutrition. The Texas cow forever has been my image regarding the impact of nutrition on cows.

A survey among producers was conducted regarding beef management priorities. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of 15 management categories as foundational, important or beneficial.

Herd nutrition was ranked by 77 percent of the respondents as foundational and 23 percent as important. The bottom line is obvious. You are not in the cow business if you don't have feed. Also, you will not stay in the cow business if you do not manage your feed resources appropriately.

It is important to understand that just having feed doesn't mean success. The management and allocation of the nutrients available is what counts.

Several years ago, a producer made the comment

that the best feed was fed during late gestation while the weather was cold and rough so the cows could make it through the winter. The poor feed was saved for after calving when the weather was good.

Granted, there is some human logic to that statement. However, cow sense would note that a cow's nutritional requirements were not being factored into the equation.

A short discussion of the cow's nutritional requirements before and after calving helped the producer allocate the energy and protein available. Tweaking of the plan allows the cows to be managed in such a way as to avoid unexpected costs or decreased production when feed is short.

However, knowledge of the absolute value of nutrition is not enough to ensure success or profit in the beef business. Rather, the No. 1 priority is to understand how nutrients interact with the management of other available resources.

Some new data from the 2006 report of the North Dakota Farm and Ranch Business Management program (<http://www.ndfarmmanagement.com>) showed some interesting figures. Based on net return per cow, managers in the low 20 percent averaged \$292.59 on total feed costs, the middle 40 percent to 60 percent averaged \$256.95 on total feed costs and the upper 20 percent of the herds averaged \$227.31.

In terms of percent of total direct expenses, the low 20 percent spent 72.2 percent feeding the cow herd and the middle 40 percent to 60 percent spent 73.8 percent, while the top 20 percent spent 73.3 percent of their total direct expenses feeding the cow herd.

Again, it simply is not just having feed available for cows, but rather the managerial ability to appropriately allocate nutritional resources in combination with all resources available.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>. For more information, contact the NDB-CIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

Importance of Cow Herd Nutrition

Commercial cow-calf producers and industry specialists on herd nutrition.

77% — foundation to the herd

23% — is important

From 'Priorities First: Identifying Management Priorities in the Commercial Cow-Calf Business'; by Tom Field, Ph.D., Fort Collins, Colo.