



BeefTalk: Now Is the Time to Sort Old Cows

A sort by age is based on the previous year's records and then fit to the current year's stocking plan.

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The question of cattle numbers is always present. With the current dry conditions, cow numbers are on the minds of cattle producers.

Cattle need to eat and, usually, the available forage is directly connected to the available moisture. As unpleasant as the thought of reducing a cowherd is, a plan needs to be ready if dry conditions persist.

Cows generally are viewed as a herd, but all producers know that the herd is made up of smaller groups. The decision to reduce the cowherd really is a process of deciding what groups to keep to make up the whole herd.

In a broad perspective, one can classify cows as young, mature, old or older. There are excellent, good, fair, average, poor and bad cows.

There are cows that are daughters of good, average or poor bulls. There are cows with calves at side, pregnant or open. And there are cows we like and those we don't like.

Next week the Dickinson Research Extension Center will sort cows on paper. The following week the calves are worked and hauling to their respective pastures gets under way.

Age is the first sort. The sort will be based on the previous year's records and then fit to the current year's stocking plan.

Last year's calf records per cow showed we had 56 2-year-olds that weaned 530 pounds of calf per cow, 48 3-year-olds that weaned 573 pounds, 44 4-year-olds that weaned 581 pounds, 30 5-year-olds that weaned 627 pounds, 44 6-year-olds that weaned 620 pounds, 32 7-year-olds that weaned 599 pounds, seven 8-year-olds that weaned 643 pounds, 16 9-year-olds that weaned 607 pounds, 16 10-year-olds that weaned 582 pounds, one 11-year-old that weaned 534 pounds and one 12-year-old that never weaned a calf.

Young cows are more prevalent in the herd. The data also shows old cows do not produce as well as middle-aged cows. While old cows will wean calves, cowherd reduction needs to begin with old cows.

Old cows require more care and will not compete for forage against younger cows. Sort off the old cows (more than 10 years of age) and put them in a "maybe sell" pen.

Some lines of cattle perform better than others and maintain their ability to milk better. However, if pasture is short, a cow more than 10 is old.

Further review of the data shows 5-, 6-, 7-, 8- and 9-year-old cows weaned 627, 620, 599, 643 and 607 pounds of calf per cow, respectively. The 10-year-olds last year that will be 11-year-olds this year did not produce more than 600 pounds of calf and will not produce more pounds of calf this year. These cows are in their declining production years and, ultimately, as they lose their teeth, they will continue to decline.

Images

Cow Herd Distribution		
Dickinson Research Extension Center		
Age	Number of Cows	Average Weaning Weight per Cow (lbs.)
Two	56	530
Three	48	573
Four	44	581
Five	30	627
Six	44	620
Seven	32	599
Eight	7	643
Nine	16	607
Ten	16	582
Eleven	1	534
Twelve	1	No calf weaned

Cow Herd Distribution

As the old cows age within any environment, their decline will increase proportionately and the first indication of stress will reduce milk production, which translates to a smaller calf.

Remember, the decisions to survive dry weather are decisions that will position the cattle operation better for next year, so the old cows should be the first set of cows set aside for potential sale.

While the genetics for performance may be in the old cow and calf, the nutrition will not support the pair. The cows are still up and available, so cut those older cows to the side and then see what else might fit in the hold pen.

Obviously open cows and those that lost their calves and did not accept a “within herd twin graft” already should have gone to town. With high grain prices and the prospect of escalating hay prices, there is a real term for cows without calves. It’s called beef.

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.

NDSU Agriculture Communication

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