

BeefTalk: Grass vs. Grain – Steer Gains

Grass Fed vs. Grain Fed	
Average daily gain for Dickinson Research Extension Center steers from early May until mid-August	
Feedlot Steers	- 4.07 pounds per day; Mid-August weight 1,150 pounds
Grazing Steers	- 2.80 pounds per day; Mid-August weight 1,091 pounds

Grass Fed vs. Grain Fed - average daily gain of steers from May to August

Changes in farm cultural practices continue to evolve as producers and academic research explore ways to make the environment, crops and animals work for the producer.

There is excitement in the air, or I should say excitement in the grass. The excitement leads to the interesting numbers of 2.80 and 4.07.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center sent steers to the feedlot in early May and sent a similar set of steers to grass at the same time.

Doug Landblom, DREC animal scientist, says that, through mid-August, the steers in the feedlot had gained 4.07 pounds per day. The steers on grass gained 2.80 pounds per day. Actual body weight was 1,150 pounds for the feedlot steers and 1,091 pounds for the grass steers. Both groups need more time before finishing.

One of the feedlot steers was sold because he did not respond to the health treatments and care provided by the feedlot. No health issues have been evident in the grazing steers.

Are these numbers relevant? What do the numbers mean as producers display considerable interest in shifting toward the grass business?

With the increased cost of feedlot inputs, should producers be adding 2.80 pounds a day to their calves as yearlings or selling the calves at weaning time? Technically, the calves that were sent to market in early May would be classified as yearlings. However, is the additional gain on grass worth it? How much time in the feedlot will be reduced by the weight the calves added while on grass? Will the perceived benefits of calves on grass carry through to the producer's pocketbook?

At the very least, the DREC has two numbers to work with and more to come, but the grass questions remain very real. Stay tuned for more grass data in the future.

In the meantime, the DREC will host a workshop called "Grazing Alternatives to High Grain Prices" on Sept. 13 southwest of Manning. The Grassfed Exchange is hosting a workshop called "Grassfed Beef – The New Multi-Billion \$\$ Industry – Fueled by Demand and High Corn Prices" on Sept. 15-17 in Norfolk, Neb. Both events were triggered by changes in the cattle feeding industry.

Changes in farm cultural practices continue to evolve as producers and academic research explore ways to make the environment, crops and animals work for the producer. Successful food systems have to produce the food we need, provide profits for the farmer, protect resources and offer producer families a high-quality life.

High grain prices continue to challenge cattle feeding profits, so there are many questions. What is right for the beef industry when it comes to frame size, muscling and feed efficiency? How does one select for forage finishing? Is there a correct method to forage grazing? How does a producer fit all the information into his or her operation?

Producer efforts already are in place and offer real examples of how producing and direct marketing grass-finished beef can work. However, that brings up more questions. Just where is the grass-fed industry? What are the genetic opportunities? How does grass-fed beef fit with soil health? How do chefs feel grass-fed beef fits in with American tastes?

We have many questions to answer. For some answers, visit the DREC website at <http://www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/dickinso/> or The Grassfed Exchange at <http://www.grassfedexchange.com/>. Keep checking the sites because education is an ongoing process.

For the DREC, the numbers 2.80 and 4.07 are important baseline figures that should help evaluate the shifting trends in beef production. As soon as the dollars catch up to the gain, the added value that is represented by 2.80 pounds per day gain on grass versus 4.07 pounds per day gain in the feedlot can be assessed.

Under which management program do the steers gain more value back to the producer? Obviously, costs need to be subtracted from the daily gain in value, so the numbers will be very interesting once both sets of cattle are harvested. How much value actually ended up on the rail?

Ultimately, we want to find out if the slower grass process is better than the faster grain-fed process in terms of dollars. Stay tuned.

May you find all your ear tags.