

BeefTalk 584: Twenty Years of Great Beef Production

Past, Present and Future

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The old saying, “you can’t get blood out of turnips,” takes on a new twist as edible protein for human consumption continues to increase through the utilization of forages not high on the menu. Beef production requires forage that simple-stomached species have difficulty in digesting.

By grazing, beef producers not only stimulate more forage production, but also harvest beef, a much desired item on the menu. This win/win situation has continued throughout history as beef producers have fine-tuned their management and production skills.

Since 1963, the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association has been collecting data. This documentation of facts helps producers evaluate and re-evaluate measurable production traits for herd improvement.

Although individual data points may not signify much, data points through time certainly offer significant insight (that may signify trends) in what is happening. The NDBCIA annually summarizes the typical performance of beef cattle herds using the CHAPS programs and develops five-year rolling herd performance benchmark values for several traits. The data from individual years provides insight and integrates well into the decision-making process for individual producers.

Recent data shows NDBCIA producers using the CHAPS program had increased herds. In 1990, producers typically exposed 141 cows to the bull. By 2000, 159 cows were being exposed to the bull. In 2010, 228 cows were being turned out for breeding.

As herds expanded, the typical age has gone up. In 1990, cows averaged 5.4 years of age. In 2000, the average was 5.4 years of age, and in 2010, the typical cow age was 5.7 years. Producers simply have culled less. In 1990, the culling rate was 16.9 percent; in 2000, 15.5 percent; and in 2010, 13.7 percent.

Producers are running more cows and keeping them longer. Young cow replacement is measured by replacement rates. In 1990, the replacement rate was 17.8 percent; in 2000, 19.1 percent; and in 2010, 15.5 percent.

During the same time frame, cattle production, or the pounds of beef produced, has gone up. The average weight of calves at fall weighing was 558 pounds in 1990, 549 pounds in 2000 and 564 pounds in 2010.

The age that the calves were weaned certainly has trended younger. In 1990, typical calves were being weaned (or weighed with a delayed weaning) at 195 days of age. In 2000, the typical calf was 199 days of age. In 2010, the typical age was 190 days. If the average weight of a calf is adjusted for age of the calf, the adjusted 205-day weight in 1990 was 612 pounds; in 2000, was 595 pounds; and in 2010, was 635 pounds.

In terms of management, producers seem to be leveling off expectations for growth of individual calves as total calf production per operation has gone up along with the increase in cows exposed to the bull in the spring. Perhaps the first question that comes to mind relates to impact on reproduction and calf death loss as herds have expanded.

The simplest check would be on the percentage of cows that actually wean a calf. In 1990, 91.8 percent of the cows weaned a live calf, while in 2000, 89.5 percent of the cows weaned a calf and in 2010, 90.5 percent brought home a live calf. Combining growth and reproduction, in terms of pounds weaned per cow exposed, in 1990, 506 pounds of calf was weaned per cow exposed; in 2000, 488 pounds of calf was weaned per cow exposed; and in 2010, 505 pounds of calf was weaned per cow exposed.

Beef producers are producing beef. The last 20 years have seen some significant challenges, but through it all, those herds that have been involved with NDBCIA have met those challenges and are producing more in grand style.

May you find all your ear tags.