

Beef talk 757: Commercial Beef Production Remains a Stable Business

Beef producers are meeting the demands of modern beef production and can look forward to future decades with optimism.

The beef business is quite consistent, despite all the trending articles that are written.

In fact, when one takes a look at data in the world of commercial production, gradual changes are noted, but radical change is not something that is evident within those commercial beef units. Production through decades is a better indicator of change than year-to-year changes.

Dollars, income and expenses, are different. Markets will and do change daily, and the change can be quite significant. But beef production, at least the engines that pull the train, plug along, year after year, doing what they need to do: that is, produce beef.

The cows that make up the majority of the production system remain on the ranch until their productive years come to the end. For several years, we hope. Change in the calves is noted, as different bulls are selected and genetic trends are evident. These trends are a response to a seedstock producer's selection criteria and subsequent bulls offered for sale.

However, even these changes are not as dramatic as one would think. Of course, the answer to these thoughts involves data - data throughout a long period of time. The North Dakota State University Extension Service, through the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association (NDBCIA), calculates the typical performance of beef cattle herds by analyzing those herds that utilize the Cow Herd Appraisal of Performance Software (CHAPS) program.

The Extension Service has been keeping records since 1963 through the NDBCIA and presents these annual evaluations as five-year rolling benchmark values for average herd performance for several traits. This data source allows one to review old data as well as new data; thus, this provides the ability to get some indication of how commercial production changes.

The most recent benchmarks were just released and provide a picture of current beef production. These benchmarks included the years 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013. For comparison, I compared the 2014 benchmarks with the 1999 benchmarks that included the years 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998. Through the decades, the beef business has changed, and beef type and the expectation of beef cows have been modified to fit current needs.

As a long-term business, producers deal with the current situation, but one can look back and see if much change has occurred in recent years. We can better understand normal by looking through time.

The data is presented in percentages or actual values, depending on the trait. Overall reproductive traits expressed in percentages of cows exposed and some basic growth traits are presented.

Herd reproduction is the driving force behind overall production if a herd is to be evaluated based on cows exposed. And the first question a producer needs to ask is: "Are the cows breeding, conceiving, calving and weaning calves as expected?"

Currently, the typical CHAPS producer has 93.1 percent (1999 benchmark 92.4 percent) of the cows that are exposed pregnant in the fall, with 92.5 percent (1999 benchmark 91.5 percent) calved in the spring. In the fall, 89.8 percent (1999 benchmark 88.7 percent) of the cows exposed weaned a calf.

All the reproductive values have improved. The improvement may not seem large, but positive movement in the reproductive traits is always good and indicative of good management or maybe even improved management.

In addition, during a typical calving season, 61.1 percent (1999 benchmark 57.2 percent) calved during the first 21 days, 86.4 percent (1999 benchmark 86.9 percent) calved during the first 42 days, and 96 percent (1999 benchmark 96 percent) calved within the first 63 days of the calving season.

Interestingly, more cows are calving in the first 21 days of the calving season currently than in the mid-1990s. Again, that's a positive.

Current cow average age is 5.5 years, while the 1999 benchmark was 5.4 years.

In regard to the current benchmarks for calf age and growth, actual weaning numbers were as follows: age was 191 days (1999 benchmark 193 days), weight was 558 pounds (1999 benchmark 542 pounds), frame score was 5.6 (1999 benchmark 5.5) and weight per day of age was 2.95 pounds (1999 benchmark 2.8 pounds). The current pounds weaned per cow exposed to the bull is 495 pounds of calf per cow exposed to the bull and the 1999 benchmark was 477 pounds.

CHAPS Production Benchmarks		
	Current	1999
Number exposed	280 cows	197 cows
Average cow age	5.5 years	5.4 years
Pregnancy percentage	93.1%	92.4%
Calving percentage	92.5%	91.5%
Weaning percentage	89.8%	88.7%
Calving 1st 21 days	61.1%	57.2%
Calving 1st 42 days	86.4%	86.9%
Calving 1st 63 days	96.0%	96.0%
Average weaning age	191 days	193 days
Average weaning weight	558 lbs	542 lbs.
Average frame score	5.6	5.5
Weight gain per day	2.95 lbs.	2.8
Pounds weaned per cow exposed	495 lbs.	477 lbs.
Replacement percentage	15.7%	19.4%
Culling percentage	14.0%	13.8%

All these numbers certainly indicate that commercial beef production remains stable and actually is improving. Maybe management, maybe genetics, but beef producers are meeting the demands of modern beef production and can look forward to future decades with optimism.

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.