

Beef talk 766: Have a Plan to Manage Cowherd Subgroups

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Spotty spring rains are helping relieve dry conditions. However, there always will be a ranch short of moisture, so planning for the dry days is critical. But the real challenge with the implementation of a long-term grazing plan and developing stocking rate reductions based on seasonal moisture is that cattle are not easy to gather.

Historically, those cattle that are not suitable for grazing are left in the calving pens until an appropriate day arrives when they can be hauled to market. Likewise, as fall cattle gatherings occur, those cattle that are not suitable for overwintering are sorted and penned. When the appropriate day arrives, they also are hauled to market.

Both groups are replaced with bred heifers. The general formula is one replacement heifer for each cow sold.

The point and challenge is that beef producers need to have a plan. In other words, it is the process of slowly changing stocking rates to reflect the changing plant communities in response to changing moisture supplies. However, the implementation of a flexible stocking-rate plan needs to be in place prior to turnout to summer pasture.

The first point is the replacements. The first-calf heifers are approximately 15 percent of the cattle inventory, and replacement heifers can account for more than 20 percent of the cattle inventory. These are by far the two largest groups of cattle on most ranch operations, so having an alternative feeding plan for replacement heifers and first-calf heifers adds flexibility to stocking mature cows.

In dry conditions, if possible, drylot the heifers and/or the first-calf heifers. These two groups of cattle are easier to haul and usually are sorted already, so adjustments are more manageable. In reality, the alternative management of replacement and first-calf heifers may be all that is needed to address pending grass shortages.

The mature cows in the herd are more challenging. The key is to envision a plan to sort the cows and calves into alternative management groups if the supply of grass becomes an issue. Cattle producers need to implement well-designed management regimes that add or subtract and move cattle in a timely fashion to take advantage of how plants respond to moisture.

Before any plan, producers must acknowledge they are stocking appropriately within their designed grazing system. Overstocking any system will initiate an earlier grazing crisis, so stock correctly.

Even when stocking rates are within the grazing plan, a plan that allows for the movement of cattle, with an option to reduce your cattle inventory up to 15 percent, should be developed for the mature cowherd. Two suggestions are offered.

For the first step, May is a month that cattle generally still are accessible for sorting, so sort and market all the cows not nursing a calf, including first-calf heifers. Remember that open cows are market cows, so write that on the barn wall. This should reduce the herd by 5 percent, but keep in mind that replacement first-calf heifers are not added.

The second step is to take a long, hard look at those cows that would be culled anyway in the fall. If the inventory is not in sync with the feed available, market those cows as cow-calf pairs and let someone else feed them. In this case, you also are not going to add first-calf heifer replacements.

The key to any drought management plan is to cull deeply because every cow left requires feed. "I wish I had marketed a few extra cows early" too often is mumbled when the dust blows. Following calving, those cows that

are unsound, have poor udders, are poor or wild mothers, are ornery or have any other out-of-place notation in the calving book belong in this group. In addition, go through the inventory and add 9-year-old or older cows to this group.

A goal for step two should be eliminating 10 percent of the cow herd. Accessibility to these cows is critical if precipitation fails to maintain grass growth. Start thinking today about how you could access these cows if needed. Remember that the key to implementing a stock-reduction plan is to have the cattle available to market. Having to round up the whole herd to pull out a few pairs delays the implementation of the plan and uses up valuable feed in the process.

From a practical standpoint, the producer now has a pending thought process to modify his or her cattle management or reduce the cow inventory.

No longer is a producer looking at one large, unmanageable herd. Instead, the producer has manageable subgroups of cattle that include 20 percent replacement heifers, 15 percent first-calf heifers, 5 percent dry cows, 10 percent dysfunctional or older cows and 50 percent mature cows.

Manage according to the plan.

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.

A Cow Herd is Not One Herd

Alternative Management Groups are Critical

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- 15 percent first calf heifers
- 5 percent dry cows
- 10 percent dysfunctional or older cows
- 50 percent mature cow herd

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