

Beef talk 769: Cow Size and Success in the Beef Business

Coffee discussions tend to assume an answer quickly, but the reality is much more difficult and complicated.

What do you do with a group of 98 heifers in which 5 percent have a frame score of 1 and 2, 11 percent have a frame score of 3, 21 percent have a frame score of 4, 28 percent have a frame score of 5, 27 percent have a frame score of 6 and 8 percent have a frame score of 7 and 8?

A coffee break would be a good time to discuss the heifers and figure out a good approach to managing them. Actually, the heifers are from the breeding herds at the Dickinson Research Extension Center. The center maintains two particular groups of cattle.

The “range” group is small- to medium-framed cattle, while the “beef” group is medium- to large-framed cattle. As a result, the center has a good cross section of cattle that represents virtually all the frame scores available. Granted, cattle at the extremes are fewer in number, but just the same, they are there.

Recently, those familiar with the center’s cattle met over coffee to talk about what would be a good project for this set of cattle. The challenge, which is well-known to many, is obtaining data that adequately evaluates cattle frame and the association of a particular frame score with appropriate inputs and outputs.

Coffee discussions tend to assume an answer quickly, but the reality is much more difficult and complicated. Commentary within the beef industry forecasts the future with thoughts based on the current situation with analysis of the past.

A case in point: With lower cattle numbers, feedlot and harvest data strongly suggest that cattle are being held longer on feed and harvested at heavier weights. To fit current demands, that industry response is logical.

The coffee discussion about excessive carcass weight slowly diminishes as discounts on excess carcass weight fade. Granted, there still is a discount, but the acceptable weights have increased. The obvious discussion that follows centers on whether market cows also are increasing in harvest weight.

Yes, they are, which makes sense because increased growth genetics are being selected within the breeding herds to supply the more acceptable larger carcasses. The efficiency of cattle in the feedlot is well-studied.

In simple terms, if a feedlot producer understands the growth curve of the type of cattle being fed, the feedlot will feed those cattle to maximize lean growth and attain a desirable quality grade.

The larger-framed cattle have an extended feeding time because a feedlot can feed a ration that encourages muscle growth and can defer rations that would be more prone to fat growth. Larger- framed cattle historically have been leaner on the rail because carcass weight discounts have discouraged pushing the cattle to a later end point with a potentially higher quality grade. Therefore, under the current short supply situation, large-framed cattle are more in demand.

Frame size and breed type are two key factors that guide the management of cattle types within the feed yard. I actually have read several articles that infer that size will continue to increase to meet demand.

That being said, back at the coffee table, the topic of cow size and efficiency was the topic of the day. Are smaller-framed cows relevant today? The discussion is long because the missing pieces of the puzzle allow for speculation.

The feedlot world well understands cattle efficiency as feed efficiency. Every bite of feed needs to produce a saleable portion of beef. The cow-calf industry does not have that same level of understanding because the complexities are much greater.

The old saying that the customer is always right tends to drive the cow industry to accept feedlot assumptions because the feeder generally is the customer for the cow-calf producer.

Therefore, the center's 98 heifers, of which 5 percent have a frame score of 1 and 2, 11 percent have a frame score of 3, 21 percent have a frame score of 4, 28 percent have a frame score of 5, 27 have a percent frame score of 6 and 8 percent have a frame score of 7 and 8, offer the center a tremendous opportunity to focus on an efficiency study of the cow unit, not just the calf.

As coffee ends, there is considerable interest in pondering the future of the beef industry and how cow-calf producers will be called upon to supply beef.

What criteria are measurable and practical to collect on a set of heifers, such as those at the center, to help the cow-calf industry make informed decisions on cow size and type? It's a good question, and researchers at North Dakota State University are excited about finding the answers.

The impacts of frame size, efficiency and longevity in a commercial or any beef cow herd are key points for long-term managerial and genetic inputs. I'll keep you posted.

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.

