BeefTalk 795: Who Gets the Weight?

The opportunity to use nontraditional beef production methods is very real.

Traditional management sells Dickinson Research Extension Center steer calves at 609 pounds, and nontraditional management sells the center's long yearling steers at 1,264 pounds.

Have you ever added water to a dried sponge and watched the sponge expand? The cow-calf industry resembles the sponge.

For decades, cow-calf producers have used genetics, health, nutrition, reproduction, marketing, environment and product development to improve production. This expansion of potential productivity is like the sponge soaking up water.

The center's decades of experience with traditional, experimental and just different management practices has focused on production costs as related to improving efficiency. The efficiency could be reproductive or growth, cow or calf, range or feedlot, retained ownership or selling at weaning or many different alternative management practices that provide options for cow-calf producers.

The results have culminated in recommendations for cattle producers that encourage production systems that perform well and are quite efficient. The results generally reflect traditional cow-calf production practices, traditional being historical: how grandma and grandpa survived, how mom and dad survived and, ultimately, how the next generation will survive. The mantra for these strong generational ties has been "if it works, let's not change." Hold that thought!

Consider this question: "What happens to the sponge when you add water but you place the sponge back in the original container?" The sponge cannot expand or it can expand minimally at best.

The same is true with the cow-calf business. What happens if the producer never changes the original managerial foundation of the cow-calf operation? In other words, will the herd be able to expand and utilize new traditional or nontraditional thoughts and managerial principles? Maybe those are the questions for the day.

Today, the ever-increasing pressure of costs points to the need to limit costs and bring more cash back to the cow-calf operation. There is also continued pressure from consumers to justify all products derived from many aspects of agriculture, including meat.

The opportunity to present nontraditional ideas of production is very real. Pictures are nice. However, cattle producers riding off into the sunset, shaking the dust off a line of designer clothes after a beautiful day of working cattle are not an assurance that the operation is going to stay in business.

Cattle circles - should I say "the discussion blogs" - actively search for nontraditional solutions to current challenges. And so, the center is challenged to look at nontraditional cow-calf production.

The struggle is the challenge to actually study the difference between the traditional and nontraditional cattle systems. Such studies seldom are done because time, space and cattle required to conduct such trials are prohibitive. There are some very well-done large cattle studies, but positioning the data back to

the local cow-calf production unit is difficult, and if the unit is nontraditional in its approach to cattle production, more unknowns than knowns soon are identified.

But that does not mean the center does not try. Back to the expanding. Why not keep watering the sponge to see how far the sponge will grow? In traditional center cattle management, bulls are turned out June 1, calves are due March 12, weaning will be in early to mid-November, and cows start their last trimester of pregnancy Dec. 12. Nontraditional center management has a later calving system in which bulls are turned out Aug. 1, calves are due May 12, weaning is in early to mid-January, and cows start the last trimester of pregnancy Feb. 12.

Traditional vs. Nontraditional Management:
Who Gets the Weight?

Sale options for Dickinson Research Extension Center calves:

- Traditional management sells steer calves at 609 pounds at weaning in November
- Nontraditional management sells long yearling steers at 1,264 pounds the following November

Traditional management sells center steer calves at 609 pounds in November. Nontraditional management sells calves as yearlings at 1,264 pounds by mid-August, according to Doug Landblom, DREC animal scientist. Granted, costs and markets significantly impact producer decisions, but costs can be managed and markets can be predicted.

In the end, a producer struggles with a sluggish production response to rapid changes in costs and markets. But remaining traditional caps expansion of the operation. Furthermore, all those production practices that have been shown to improve producer opportunity to enhance cow-calf production are held back. Traditional management sells center steer calves at 609 pounds; nontraditional management sells center long yearling steers at 1,264 pounds.

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.