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BeefTalk: Beef Production is Sustainable Grass Production



Beef producers need to think outside the box.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

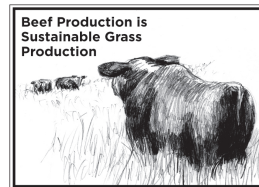
NDSU Extension Service

The Dickinson Research Extension Center has changed the bull turnout date to Aug. 1 and is not going back.

The center depends on the annual plant cycle, a cycle one cannot change, to grow and produce beef. Plants have a growing season set by forces cattle producers do not control. Producers must come to understand the plant world, develop a sustainable forage and plant system, and then integrate beef production into that system, not the other way around.

Too often, and to the detriment of the beef

Images



Beef Production is Sustainable Grass Production

columns

2016 4-H State Fair Results: Youth Compete in N.D. State 4-H Fair Dairy Show (2016-08-04) 4-H'ers win awards for dairy cattle at the State Fair. [FULL STORY](#)

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BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Beef Production is Sustainable Grass Production (2016-08-04) Beef producers need to think outside the box. [FULL STORY](#)

Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Try Making Baked Onion Rings (2016-08-04) Onions provide flavor, vitamins and minerals without adding a lot of calories. [FULL STORY](#)

Small-business Savvy: Small-business Savvy: Consistency is the Key in Customer Service (2016-08-04)

production system, the beef cow plan is laid out first, with the forage and plant production left to a later discussion. The beef-first, plants-later philosophy increases demand for hay and other processed feed. This is a commodity-based system that may very well lack system sustainability in the long run. This approach leads to watching markets: buy low, sell high.

This is not criticism but reflective of the majority of the models beef producers utilize for beef production systems. But is that the only model? No. Expandable, and, we hope, more sustainable systems need to be evaluated to assess current trends and needs.

In the future, all avenues for additional compensation need to be explored to enhance the economic viability for beef producers and the rural areas associated with beef production. This compensation results in synergistic crop production systems that integrate rotational cropping practices, high-residue management and annual forages. Attention to wildlife habitat enhancement could be used to diversify income and open doors to other value-added opportunities in concert with crop production.

The center, as part of North Dakota State University, takes seriously the need for sustainable beef systems. The center was mandated by the North Dakota Legislature more than 110 years ago to develop sustainable and

Consistently good service brings customers back. [FULL STORY](#)

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integrated production strategies matching forage, plant and cattle conditions of western North Dakota and surrounding regions. The inclusion of forages into traditional cropping systems can provide the resources necessary for the development of integrated production strategies that increase sustainability and profitability.

A need exists to develop agro-ecosystems that optimize the balance between forage-based and grain-based crop/livestock systems reflective of the many individual ecosystems. These integrated systems must be synergistic to the native and agronomic plant communities, providing the base for future beef production.

Enhanced value for not only the niche commodities produced from forage-based systems but mainstream market outlets is key. Meat and high-protein crops can fulfill the general population's protein requirements. A forage-based system, integrated with crop production, can meet this demand on the current land mass, converting nature's forage into food for people. These thoughts, starting with bull turnout, changed how the center is addressing the future. Previous work set baseline production for high-residue cropping systems, grassland systems and livestock systems, but further definition, integration and refinement of these system efforts are critical.

Beef producers need to think outside the box, as does the center. We need to link the components

of agricultural management systems with value-added opportunities, ensuring long-term sustainability of beef and cropping systems within the environment. An integrated agricultural system that truly entwines crop, beef and forage production as a working unit for betterment needs to be embraced.

And so, the bull turnout is Aug. 1 for a targeted calving start date of May 12. Grass turnout to cool-season grass is around May 1, with warm-season grasses ready for grazing around June 1. These cow-calf pairs convert very admirably to grazing crop residue, standing corn and cover crops as the perennial grasses start to prepare for winter.

The system works, but as with any change, time is spent getting it right. This will be the fifth year the center has turned bulls out on Aug. 1. Yes, that is too late for those who already have turned the bulls out; the traditional time is early June, two months ago.

But change is not for everybody, nor should it be. Beef production units must focus on change gradually. Spend time pondering but be open-minded. All things fail if one assumes the change will fail before it is implemented. So think hard, look hard and do not be afraid to visit the center.

The bulls will not have time to visit during the next month, but we will. We are always happy to visit, drive around and look at the cattle. The gates

have been opened. The bull turnout is the most significant day of the year for the cattle producer. Everything, and I mean everything, must be in place.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

NDSU Agriculture Communication - Aug. 4, 2016

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Attachments



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[Grass Production](#) 

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