

you are here: [home](#) → [columns](#) → [beeftalk](#) → [beeftalk: who wants to save \\$300 per calf?](#)

navigation

Links

- [News Home](#)
- [Columns](#)
- [Archives](#)

Feeds

- All News [RSS](#)
- BeefTalk [RSS](#)
- Dairy Focus [RSS](#)
- Prairie Fare [RSS](#)
- Economics [RSS](#)
- Renewable Accounts [RSS](#)
- Small-business Savvy [RSS](#)

Twitter

- On Twitter follow [NDSU Ag News](#)

BeefTalk: Who Wants to Save \$300 Per Calf?



To keep costs low, evaluate expenses, reduce production costs, and improve production and marketing efficiency.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

What if I told you how to save \$300 per head? Would you stop and ponder?

As the beef industry looks forward and market prices continue to squeeze the cow-calf producer, the questions of cost control certainly surface. At the Dickinson Research Extension Center, the cost spread in the limited number of production systems the center can study is \$300. Although these systems will not fit everyone, they are intended to cause one to

Images



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columns

[Spotlight on Economics: Spotlight on Economics: Flood Hazards Impact on House Prices in the Fargo-Moorhead Area](#) (2016-10-13) Actual flood events can change a homebuyer's perceptions about flood risk, thereby possibly discounting the home's value. [FULL STORY](#)

[BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Who Wants to Save \\$300 Per Calf?](#) (2016-10-20) To keep costs low, evaluate expenses, reduce production costs, and improve production and marketing efficiency. [FULL STORY](#)

[Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Tame Your Sweet Tooth During Trick-or-treat Season](#) (2016-10-20) Keep moderation in mind. [FULL STORY](#)

[Small-business Savvy: Small-business Savvy: Define Your Small-business Audience](#) (2016-10-20) Watching people and reading are great ways to start. [FULL STORY](#)

ponder.

At the center, three production areas continue to surface as candidates for cost reduction:

- First - later calving to decrease labor. The center calves in May-June, switching from March-April calving.
- Second - intensified forage utilization by the cows, calves and yearlings to lower overhead. The center utilizes a multiple crop rotation, including cover crops, harvesting some crops while grazing all acreage.
- Third - controlling cow size to decrease inputs and increase ranch output. The center has decreased cow size approximately 300 pounds and has two herds: the traditional herd weighing in at 1,455 pounds and the Lowline-influenced herd at 1,164 pounds.

The center's efforts within the cattle business have been to evaluate production systems that keep expenses low and keep cattle producers in business as prices swing from high to low and low to high. In reality, sustaining the beef business requires significant cost control to lower production costs while increasing output.

To keep costs low, the priorities include an evaluation of expenses, a reduction in the cost of production, and improved production and marketing efficiency. Cash, which has an impact on how producers run their operations, drove the

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center to these approaches.

Through the years, equipment depreciated and replacement costs went up. So, in the mid-'90s, the center downsized equipment needs and inventory, and asked the cow to do more. If the cow can walk, the cow can eat, and the center has not looked back.

Three main concepts have evolved. First was a move from grain and hay production to a forage base with an option for the forage to be grazed or put up as hay. Grain production was minimized to fewer acres. Annual forages supplemented May-through-October perennial grazing systems to keep cows and calves grazing well into the winter months.

Annual cropland was converted to grazeable forage, including available perennial plants as well as annuals. The main forage annual was corn, with mixtures of wheat, triticale, vetch, pea, forage barley, oats and multiple species of cover crops.

Second, the center moved from March-April to May-June calving. This switch increased the center's flexibility to utilize the forage the center produces while the cows' nutritional demands are lowered during the expensive and demanding winter months.

Thirdly, the change involved two sets of cows, one larger and one smaller, to compare how the two cow sizes fit into a later-calving, forage-based

program.

What has the center found? Let's start with the later calving date. The center does not have the resources to directly compare May-June vs. March-April calving; however, performance changes through time could be noted, and the decrease in labor is notable. The center has seen no difference in performance from 2009 to 2011, while March-April calving, compared with 2012 to 2014, while May-June calving.

Calves' average daily gain was 2.5 pound per day, cows rebred at more than 98 percent pregnant, and more than 95 percent calved in 42 days for both time periods. May-June calving had a 3 percent death loss decrease, but those same calves were 92.5 pounds lighter because they were younger by 37 days on the average. An extra month or longer of backgrounding before selling easily made up the difference in weight.

The forage concentration allowed the center to maintain cow numbers and add a yearling or heavy steer enterprise. Songul Senturklu, a visiting scholar at the center, reports the yearling steer calves are weighing in at 1,230 pounds, rather than a year earlier at 567 pounds.

While total system costs are hard to calculate, the later calving has allowed for better utilization of winter grazing. Cover crop and crop residue grazing has cut costs by one-third of the

traditional confined forage feeding. The grazing of winter grass and crop residue cut winter feeding costs by more than two-thirds of the traditional confined forage feeding of the cows.

The third objective focused on cow size. By decreasing cow size, utilizing the expanded forage base, calving in May-June and retaining ownership, the center's revenue increased 10 percent. The revenue per cow was lower, but the revenue generated per acre at the ranch was greater due to 20 percent more calves to sell. More later.

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).

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Attachments



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