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BeefTalk: Seeking Efficient Beef Cows

Separate biological and economic efficiency and keep an eye on your goal.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

What do we know about efficiency within the beef cattle business? A lot.

What do we know about understanding beef cattle efficiency? A little.

How do we implement what we know and understand? Not sure.

We have two very difficult issues when beef cattle efficiency is the focus of the discussion. The first, biological efficiency, is real and regulated by inputs, environmental limitations such as climate, and soil types.

Images

2 Thoughts on Beef Cattle Efficiency

Biological Efficiency Calves from larger cows have a 10 percent advantage when calves are the unit of production.	Economic Efficiency Calves from smaller cows have a 10 percent advantage when acres are the unit of production.
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columns

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use of releases

The news media and others may use these news releases in their entirety. If the articles are edited, the sources and

We, as producers, tend to create short-term artificial environments that are irrespective of the climate and soil. Thus, long term, what are the consequences?

The second issue, economic efficiency, is imposed and confused with biological efficiency.

The two issues are different. Humans assign a dollar value to a biological type based on human preference and desire. Thus, long term ... well, forget I asked because we all live in the "now." Biological and economic efficiency become extremely confusing, are often misinterpreted and are easily the cause of frustration.

So let us ponder this: Changes to the efficiency of any system are not easy to implement and maintain because almost all living systems will try to revert back to a natural, sustainable process through time. Natural selection forces biological efficiency. No economic force is within Mother Nature. All economic forces are a product of human civilization.

Furthermore, few human preferences are sustainable within Mother Nature. We may like off-colored critters, only soon we realize that any off-colored critter is easily selected by predators. Thus, reproduction is an opportunity only for those who fit the status quo.

Historically, agriculture fits nicely into Mother Nature's trends because these trends pull agriculture into a repetitive natural process. The repetitive processes lead producers to focus on the status quo because the status quo is the first to take advantage of the

ability to reproduce.

Producers simply facilitate reproduction of food, managing breeding populations that produce more than what Mother Nature needs. This excess feeds the human population, of which we don't know the limits of its needs, but that is another discussion.

So what can we do regarding the efficiency of the beef cattle industry? The Dickinson Research Extension Center is asking that question. The answer is very complicated and elusive, but we have found some thoughts that keep coming back to us.

The first thought: Always separate biological and economic efficiency. Repeat and repeat what point within the beef cattle world you are addressing. Keep the discussion clear. Before any discussion starts, set the main focus points.

The center has entered the efficiency question by establishing two types of cattle that are two frame scores different in hip height, as well as approximately 300 pounds different in mature body weight when the calf is weaned.

These two types of cattle are phenotypically different. You don't have trouble spotting the obvious. One is bigger than the other. And, from a cow-calf perspective, looking at biological efficiency, the calves from the larger cows have a 10 percent advantage when a cattle system is evaluated based on calves as the unit of production.

From the same cow-calf perspective, looking at economic efficiency, the calves from the smaller cows, based on acres as the unit of production, have a 10 percent advantage.

These are the two driving thoughts as the center moves forward in evaluating beef cattle efficiency. But do we actually strive to understand and make the beef cattle industry better? Who is the beef industry and just how broad do we branch out to answer the question?

I could not help but note a comment by Alan Guebert in his syndicated agricultural column, "The Farm and Food File," which was published in the Aug, 18, 2017, issue of the Farm & Ranch Guide. In his column titled "We need to talk," Guebert wrote, "We believe we can solve today's biggest agricultural problems - new disease resistance; weather extremes triggered by climate change; killer competitive global markets; low-and-going-lower farm income; dying rural communities - with bigger chemistry, bigger ignorance, bigger bullying, and bigger government spending all directed to 'help' ever fewer farmers and ranchers and increasingly skeptical eaters."

Guebert's comment is broader than the beef industry but certainly relevant to where we are. We indeed need to talk because many of these symptoms are present within each segment of agriculture, including the beef business. Discussions of beef cow efficiency, particularly relative to cow size, are embroiled in the present, not the future.

As the center continues to evolve and explore thoughts regarding the efficiency of the beef cow, more and more pieces will evolve. Putting the pieces in play within the industry is not easy. But for now, finding the pieces that fit is good.

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. 24, 2017

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Attachments



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