



BeefTalk 613: Integrating a New Grass and Beef Production Model Isn't Easy

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



The Dickinson Research Extension Center has slowly been moving the basic beef-production model to a grass-production model.

In recent years, much discussion has been held regarding grass and beef production. The concept of integrating the two production activities seems like a no-brainer. If it was just the cows visiting with each other, that would be true. However, it is inevitable that people will get in the mix and that's when the no-brainer starts getting complicated.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center has slowly been moving the basic beef-production model to a grass-production model. The process is complicated because three very large industries meet at the crossroads, which are the cow and grass business and the business of putting beef in front of the consumer.

As has been noted many times, one fundamental point is prevalent among all the charts, trends and rhetoric about the beef business: The beef business does not exist without the business of the cow because the cow is the foundation. Without cows, there is no beef or beef business.

Likewise, without grass or some similar forage plants, the cow business does not exist.

So we're back to doing what those in academia do, which is ask questions and seek answers. As the center has inched its way to establishing a different model of cow, grass and beef production, each meeting ends with more questions. What if this? What if that? Do we really know? From the onset, there are more questions than answers.

In the process, the center is trying to sort out some fundamental issues that besiege newness. For example, technology is good and improvements are even better. However, one of the first stumbling blocks of working cows within a grass model is that much of the technology was developed for a grain-based industry. This is not a negative. However, the delivery systems to implement the technology meant that the cows essentially were brought to the technology.



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Therefore, developed were better cattle-handling facilities and better delivery and feeding systems to handle cattle within the more confined facilities. Also developed were more improved methods of handling waste products generated in the confined facilities. This process was started and certainly encouraged as crop producers became more efficient at crop production.

Because the ability to produce bountiful yields accelerated quicker than the human population could distribute and consume the increased crop production, the current animal industry (including cows) slowly morphed into a grain-consuming business.

In the big picture, almost all, if not all, producers were educated, started and perfected their careers, and now are getting ready to retire. Their education and careers were based on a system of food production that started in the middle of the last century.

What is wrong with that? If one might answer one's own question, nothing is wrong with that. Crop production continues to perfect itself in an effort to meet the human demand for food. The challenge is that not all plants are intended for direct human consumption. Not all land is suitable for crop production. Not all land is required to house or entertain people. So the question, debate or what we do next rests with the usage of the remaining lands.

Yes, cattle work well while grazing these lands. As the center proceeds, the first step is to identify those weak spots in the production system that could be improved through research. Much like the example of technology implementation, once the question is asked, baseline observations can be noted and future questions answered through good research.

The center has baseline data on the cost of implementing technology within a cow herd. For example, to start with, affordable and creditable records need to be established. Something as simple as putting on an ear tag has costs. The center has estimated that per-calf costs are \$5 for tags, data management and verification, and \$7 for working the calves, tag placement and documentation. If more knowledge is desired, feedlot and harvest data collection and chute fees easily may be \$8 per head, so the total cost estimate per calf worked on the ranch is \$20.

When the center measured shrink in the cattle we have worked, estimated costs of up to \$10 to \$20 in lost income potential per calf can be documented.

The immediate goal is to establish cow-calf production on grass and then record what is or is not working. Simply moving all the overhead from winter- or early spring-based calving programs to May is not an option.

Again, moving to grass is great and subtracting costs is the goal. Keeping and improving technology also is desired. However, the road gets a little bumpy when the how-to questions start coming. More on that later.

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.

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