



BeefTalk 674: Pondering Grass

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

A Thought to Ponder

The Dickinson Research Extension Center had three pens of yearling steers, one pen was harvested at 18.1 months of age, the next pen was harvested at 21.4 months of age and the last pen was harvested at 22.1 months of age.

Does this make sense?

The efficiency of a beef production system is perceived to be based on rapid growth with an early harvest. Is that true?

The Dickinson Research Extension Center had three pens of yearling steers. One pen (A) was harvested when the steers were 18.1 months old. The next pen (B) was harvested when the steers were 21.4 months old and the last pen (C) was harvested when they were 22.1 months old.

The world of beef revolves around the steer because it is the principle product of a beef production system. The efficiency of a beef production system is perceived to be based on rapid



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growth with an early harvest.

Is that true? Having personally assumed that for years, considerable pondering is required to change things. As producers, what we learn and ultimately do is assumed to be correct, but times change and so does the world, and so I ponder and hope many others also ponder.

Let me repeat that the Dickinson REC had three pens of yearling steers. Pen A was harvested when the steers were 18.1 months old. Pen B was harvested when the steers were 21.4 months old and pen C was harvested when they were 22.1 months old.

In addition, the steers in pen A were on feed for 142 days, pen B for 66 days and pen C for 91 days. Having lived through a few decades of beef production with the driving force being efficiency and growth based on affordable energy inputs, none of the statistics for these pens are very impressive. In fact, the only limiting factor for growth was pelvic size because, no matter how much effort was put on growth, the calf still had to get out of the cow.

Prebirth and subsequent growth still is highly correlated, although gestational length and some tweaking of growth genes have allowed for some change in the prebirth and post-birth scenarios. However, the basic concept has not changed.

The other limiting factor to rapid growth was the limitations placed on carcass size at harvest. These limitations most certainly have varied with time and are somewhat correlated with beef supplies. That's because the larger beef numbers limit the need to push for heavier carcass weights. With today's beef supply numbers being down, there

certainly is a logical acceptance of needing heavier carcasses.

So, what do I ponder? Well, efficiency still is paramount in any industry. The efficient use of resources should generate a positive outcome if there is a positive outcome available. Producers who are efficient should be more profitable. Steer feedlot pens that achieve high gains of 5 pounds or more per day are duly noted. Lower gains of less than 3 pounds would be assumed to be very inefficient.

In visiting with Doug Landblom, an animal scientist with the Dickinson REC, these steers were weaned and overwintered at less than a pound of gain per day. So what do I ponder? Well, that goes against everything I've learned. These steers, in retrospect, could gain 4.5-plus pounds per day in the feedlot, so logically they could have gained that earlier in life had they been sent as calf-feds to a feedlot following weaning. With those gains, the majority of those steers would have been harvested at 12 to 15 months of age. However, they were not sent. Instead, they were targeted for grass. And so I ponder.

The center is compiling more economic data. In visiting with Landblom, pen A of yearling steers that was sent to the feedlot prior to grass turnout and harvested at 18.1 months of age lost the center \$298.05. Pen B of yearling steers that was sent to grass for summer grazing but brought in to graze higher-quality annual crops as the pastures dried down were harvested at 21.4 months and made the center a profit of \$9.09. The yearling steers in pen C that were grazed all season and then sent to a feedlot in the fall and harvested at 22.1 months of age lost the center \$30.10.

Even though the harvest price did not support a strong profit incentive back to the center, the center could not overlook the difference of \$307.14 between the lowest negative profit pen (A) and the highest positive profit pen (B). And so I ponder.

The motivation for keeping the steers over winter on a low level of nutrition was low costs, but there also was a relatively inefficient gain. On a positive note, although small, the only profitable pen was pen B that was grazed on early summer grass followed by annual crops and then a short time in the feedlot.

There will be more later and more to ponder. However, keeping the steers longer did not result in a negative impact. If anything, particularly with the need to increase carcass weight as cattle numbers drop, more positive weight was added.

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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