



## BeefTalk 736: Time to Sort the Thin, Young or Old Cows

### SUPPORTING MATERIALS



*“Thin cows do not compete” and “they need more feed” are points that need to be written on a barn wall, painted on pasture fences and noted on all of your paperwork.*

Today’s point is that cows will regain body condition easier when production demands are low. Also, as a general rule, when the living have adequate food but are limited to little activity, weight gain occurs. If food is bountiful, weight gain will occur even faster.

In the case of cows, producers should take advantage of this. As cows go out of production during late lactation and weaning, fall provides an excellent time to put weight on cows. In addition, the

cow does not need to channel calories into staying warm, so do it now.

Feed seems to be ample in the northern Great Plains. However, after a quick review of the U.S. drought monitor map, one is quickly reminded that those dark red, excessively dry areas always seem to be present somewhere. This year, cattle in the southwestern and western areas of the U.S. may have more difficulty finding feed, which, in reality, is the largest direct expense for cattle producers.

In fact, according to the North Dakota Farm Management education program (<http://www.ndfarmmanagement.com/>), along with FINBIN (<http://www.finbin.umn.edu/>) from the Center for Farm Financial Management at the University of Minnesota, almost three-fourths of the direct expenses of a cow can be traced back to feed-related items.

Although current market trends tend to muffle these expenses, they still are expenses, so long-term survivability relates to the ability to control expenses. A quick look at some of the numbers available from FINBIN shows that production costs are escalating. Annual direct costs are approaching \$500 per cow, or almost \$1.40 per day.

If feed-related expenses continue at three-fourths of direct expenses, \$1-a-day feed costs soon will be pretty common. Of course, there still are big, medium and smaller cows. There are cows that eat at bunks and cows that walk a mile for lunch. There are cows that could fill a milk bucket and those that introduce their calf to outside feed quickly.

More than likely, all these types of cows exist in herds across the area because a lot of cows are not selected for specific traits that lower costs. Instead, they are selected for specific traits that increase production. Also, the



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information that is known about cow efficiency relative to decreasing feed costs is not readily implemented into a cow herd. For the average herd and typical producer, why not acknowledge those time frames when a positive impact could be made to lower total feed costs.

For example, a moderately milking 1,300-pound cow would like to eat about 30 pounds of good, green hay a day prior to weaning. After weaning, that same cow needs 26 to 27 pounds of that same hay. In other words, the cow is no longer milking and does not need the extra feed. However, if the feed is offered, such as during fall aftermath grazing, the cow will store that extra feed as improved body condition. Even if feed is plentiful, the producer can take feed away from well-conditioned cows and give it to the thin cows. The thin cows should respond with increased conditioning, which means they will be better prepared for winter and next year's calving.

No-emergency pre- or post-calving feedings mean less overall expense. Each fall, there is a window of opportunity to evaluate cow condition and improve the condition of those cows that are thin.

There are two very important points to consider. Cows that are thin will be thin to thinner in the spring if adequate nutrition is not increased now. Also, thin cows do not compete well with cows that are in better condition.

"Thin cows do not compete" and "they need more feed" are points that need to be written on a barn wall, painted on pasture fences and noted on all of your paperwork.

Standard fall production practices should include a visit with a good nutritionist and applying common sense. The most practical solution is to split the herd at weaning into at least two groups.

Cows that are thin, showing no fleshiness, and some obvious rib and bone structure, need to be sorted out. In addition to these thin cows, young and old cows also may be added to the sorted-out group. The second group should be the better-conditioned, mature cows, and they should be fed accordingly. This group should not require the greater degree of supplementation the first sort needs.

Overly conditioned, nonproductive cows make good market beef, so you don't need a separate pen for them, just a truck. The bottom line: Don't wait because fall is the time to bring cows back into condition and, if you are going to buy some supplement, put it where it needs to go.

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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