Cows Are Coming Off the Corn in Good Shape

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Producers are starting to dust off their pre calving checklists as they get ready to think about calving. One unique aspect of the cattle business is the overlap of various generations.

I have noted many times, we are collecting carcass data from bulls purchased two years ago, preparing to collect calf data from the bulls purchased last year and currently selecting bulls to cull, keep and purchase for the upcoming breeding season. If thatís not confusing enough, the office discussion this week was what is a first-calf heifer, replacement heifer, bred heifer, second-calf heifer, heifer calf, replacement-bred heifer or just plain yearling, two-year-old or three-year-old cow.

There is little question, communication within the beef industry can be difficult at times. These various terms vary from region to region, and thatís before we begin talking about fall- and spring-calving herds.

In the midst of this discussion, North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center animal scientist Jim Nelson stopped by to talk about second-calf bred heifers (or coming three-year old cows) that came off standing corn. The data is hot, the analysis is not complete and the discussion will continue for days.

The test began Oct. 23, 2002, shortly after we weaned the calves from the cows. The cows weighed 1,120 pounds and had a body condition score of four, which means ribs were very noticeable and the cows lacked fat cover.

Sixteen cows grazed 14 acres of unharvested, standing corn for 91 days, a stocking rate of roughly a third of an acre per cow per month. The cows are due to calf early in March with their second calf.

On Jan. 21, 2003, the cows came off the corn at an average of 1,387 pounds for a gain of 267 pounds, an average daily gain of 2.93 pounds. This gain is body weight plus any growth in the fetus. The condition score was a strong six when the cows finished the grazing. On average, the cows picked up 2.4 visual condition scores.

Jimís sampling techniques estimated just under 6 ton of standing corn (dry matter) per acre. Jim is currently on his way to remeasure the remaining plant material. This was an estimated standing corn crop of 54 bushels per acre. Approximately 112 pounds per cow per day of total plant was available per cow.

As Jim and I reviewed the budgets, the cows also received an average of 1.7 pounds of cake per day. The cows were only caked on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. In total, the cows received 155 pounds of cake per head over the three months at a cost of $18 dollars per head. Mineral and salt were fed free choice. The cows had wind break and water at all times.

The bottom line needs to be calculated, however, preliminary data analysis indicates corn grazing may not be the cheapest route for wintering cows. (This conclusion is supported by data from previous years.) However, the value of the back fat on a cow and subsequent feeding regimes needs to also be taken in to account.

Many variables remain to be taken into account: perhaps the supplement could be adjusted, perhaps the corn limited. No cows foundered, no cows were stiff or lame.

After several years, we need to more aggressively address the value, perceived or real, of back fat on cows. Are the credits greater than the debits? If so, corn grazing seems to be a viable option as a cow management practice. If not, the practice will not be adopted. We know corn puts condition on pregnant cows. In our experience, reconditioning young and old cows--generally thin cows--is difficult under many western North Dakota winter management scenarios. Stay tuned for more financial data and analysis on the back fat saga.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at *www.BeefTalk.com*. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to *www.CHAPS2000.com* on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0127.

Cow Performance
Grazing Standing Corn
Oct. 23 to Jan. 21

Average start weight	1,120 lbs.
Beginning body condition score	4.4
Average end weight	1,387 lbs.
Ending body condition score	6.8
Average gain per cow	267 lbs.

NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center