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BeefTalk: What Makes a Good Cow?

A good cow is one that fits the environment.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Cows are as different - or similar - as the producers who care for them.

So, the definition of a good cow depends on a producer's appreciation of just what cow he or she wants to work with and tolerance for bad cows with which he or she is willing to work.

But all cows must pay the bills, despite a general lack of responsibility and a preference for lowing in the meadows. Producers determine the success of the beef operation; that's not an easy task.

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The other day, I visited with American Salers Association producers about maternal genetics prior to their national summer tour in North Dakota. As I pondered “what makes a good cow,” I slowly concluded that this issue has no simple answer.

A panel of producers described their operations. The producers had incorporated Salers cattle into their operations very well. The cattle had become a stable part of their beef operations and were meeting their production goals.

Producer stories, regardless of breed, tell of the ability to adapt a breed to an individual producer’s operation, an exercise that takes years. And producers have no option to buy success.

Producer willingness to incorporate the unique traits of a particular breed into the management and physical attributes of the production system is key to embracing any particular type of cattle. Interestingly, each producer had gotten past the early introduction issues of a newer breed of cattle and finally moved his or her herd to a predominately Salers base. Patience with an eye on a focused goal was critical.

The big challenge in the cattle industry is finding female cattle that will satisfy the producer and raise offspring that fulfill the needs of the beef chain. Common thoughts from the Salers producers are the same or similar to those

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expressed in many meetings as producers try to adapt to a lower-cost, lower-labor business.

From an academic point, cow fertility is always the easiest descriptor of a good cow. She must breed early, rebreed quickly and produce copious calves that are a mainstay year after year.

Other traits evaluated will impact cow fertility, such as milk and growth. Too much milk is usually the first trait mentioned when fertility is lower than desired. However, excess growth also is mentioned because cow size certainly impacts nutritional requirements.

These traits that impact fertility are producer-dependent because feed availability and feed quality directly impact a cow's ability to rebreed, grow and milk. And producers are responsible for providing the proper nutrition to the cows.

Usually, fertility depends on an operation's geographic ability to match feed resources with a cow's demand to breed, milk and grow. Perhaps that is a good point of discussion for producers as they ponder cow needs.

The historic tendency has been to increase supplemental feed in an effort to maximize cow fertility. Would that be wrong? I did not say it was wrong, but if a cattle producer wants to decrease costs, those inputs that are not grown on the cattle operation need to be purchased. Maybe that is good, and maybe not.

Always note: When purchasing the basic needs of the cow operation, those purchase prices are paying someone else's salary. And just how many salaries is the cow expected to pay for? When is a supplement truly a supplement to increase the efficient use of forage grown on the cattle operation versus becoming a staple to sustain the fertility of cows that have outgrown the cattle operation's ability to sustain them with home-grown inputs?

The size and nutritional requirements of differing sizes of cows impact the decision as to what type of cow is needed. The ability of a producer to select the right cows is directly related to how those cows will fit the environment. But the ability of a producer to set calving time to make sure the cow is given the best chance to be fertile and survive is also the responsibility of the producer. Forcing good cows into the wrong environment is a lose/lose situation.

This means matching bull turnout and subsequent calving to low-cost, low-labor opportunities within the cattle operation. So maybe the question is wrong. What makes a good cow really depends on how well the producer can match the cow to the place. Good cows breed early, rebreed quickly and produce copious calves while living on a low-cost budget and requiring little labor.

The Salers cattle were meeting the production

needs of those attending the gathering. Knowing producers are taking active steps to lower costs and labor through the implementation of production practices that align cattle to the desired environment was nice to hear.

Bringing the environment to the cattle through additional costs and labor is a nonforgiving effort. Rather, producers should consider having the cattle gestate and milk when pastures can meet the needs of the expectant cow and transition through birth to the grazing cow-calf pair.

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).

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Attachments



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