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BeefTalk: Why Push a Chain Up a Hill?

Matching cattle inventory and calving date with appropriate forage-based systems is critical.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

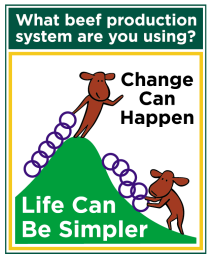
The recent January thaw has helped cows into their generally relaxed routine in which they're essentially finding shelter, eating, drinking and returning to shelter.

The slow days of late gestation are eminent. In another month, many cows will be calving. Producers have time now to look ahead.

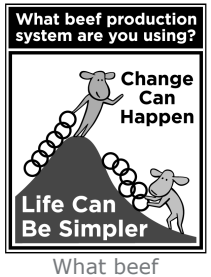
In fact, the cow actually is looking ahead as well, trying to determine what the perfect spot will be to give birth to her new calf. If we are not careful, we miss some of those subtle herd discussions as we drive by.

That being said, I was driving by some pasture the other day and an eerie feeling came over me. The snow had thawed and what snow was left was blown aside, exposing the grassless soil surface among occasional nodes of grass. The sinking, scary feeling of drought returned.

Images



What beef production system are you using?



What beef production system are you using?

Last summer took a serious toll, leaving even fewer options this spring if rain fails. But rather than focus on the negative, let's be positive and draw on what we know. Long-term, sustainable thinking means less inputs and more output.

Drought-driven, sustainable managerial changes force producers to limit feed intake during the months that feed is short, keeping a delicate balance between hungry and

columns

Spotlight on Economics: Spotlight on Economics: We Enjoy Environmental Services Without Paying for Them (2018-01-17) The benefits of nature-based recreation should be accounted for when making public-policy decisions on public lands and environmental programs. FULL STORY

BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Why Push a Chain Up a Hill? (2018-01-25) Matching cattle inventory and calving date with appropriate forage-based systems is critical. FULL STORY

Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Immune System, Put On Your Boxing Gloves (2018-01-25) You have several ways to help your immune system resist colds and flu. FULL STORY

content. Feed waste is not an option. And producers have an innate desire for the time when what feed is going to grow actively grows.

In preparation for this winter, many producers decreased the body weight mass of the cow herd fed through the winter. Many times, that means keeping lighter, younger cows, as well those cows with a reduced body size, to decrease total feed needs and, at the same time, keeping open the opportunity to add more cows in the future if the seasons normalize.

In an effort to add more options, the Dickinson Research Extension Center has increased cropping systems' plant diversity by focusing on crops that will provide forage even if the plants do not reach a growth stage for grain production. Shifting acres to fall-seeded winter intercrop mixes allows the center to take advantage of available cool-season growth following the spring thaw.

These planting thoughts have increased beef average daily gain on annual crops successfully and provided profit opportunity with improved forage production per acre. Despite the need to reduce the overwinter mass of cattle, the center's yearling stocking rates have increased.

The other significant change at the center is avoiding feeding lactating cows in winter dry lots and moving cows to pasture prior to calving. The 1,400- to 1,500-pound cow needs just less than 30 pounds of dry matter before calving, more than 35 pounds of dry matter right after calving and just less than 40 pounds after calving if she milks well.

More hay is needed, more water is needed and more waste is generated. So the center has taken seriously the later spring calving as an opportunity for North Dakota beef producers.

Think about it: Producers depend on the annual plant cycle, a cycle one cannot change, to grow and produce beef. Plants have a growing season set by forces cattle producers do not control. When producers understand the development of a sustainable forage and plant world, they integrate beef production into that system.

Too often, and to the detriment of the beef production system, the beef cow plan is laid out first, leaving forage and plant production to a later discussion. The beef-first, plants-later philosophy increases demand for hay and other processed feed and increased equipment needs to haul in inputs and haul out waste.

This is a commodity-based system that may very well lack system sustainability in the long run. This approach leads to watching markets: Buy low, sell high. This is not criticism

but reflective of the majority of the models beef producers utilize for beef production systems.

But is that the only model? No. Expandable and, we hope, more sustainable systems are available. Producers need to understand and take seriously the need for sustainable beef systems that integrate production strategies matching forage, plant and cattle conditions to the land.

Including forages into traditional cropping systems can provide the resources necessary to develop integrated production strategies that increase sustainability and profitability. Matching cattle inventory and calving date with appropriate forage-based systems is critical as producers seek later calving.

Turnout to cool-season grass is around May 1 in the northern Plains. Warm-season grasses are ready for grazing around June 1. Cows turned out to calve in May convert very admirably to grazing crop residue, standing corn and cover crops as the perennial grasses start to prepare for winter.

The system works. Realistically, change at one end of a chain affects other links, complicating the effects of change. But for those who have spent a lot of time pushing chains, why not grab the other end and pull? Change can happen. Life can be simpler.

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.

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Attachments

PDF - What beef production system are you using?

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EPS - black - What beef production system are you using?

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EPS - color - What beef production system are you using?

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