

# BeefTalk: Future of Beef Revisited - Soil, Forage and Beef

**The cow-calf business is not a simple business with cookie-cutter solutions.**

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“Did you check your review mirror?” is an often-asked question because one cannot move forward without knowing from where one came.

The challenges of years past still were challenges, just like the challenges of today. One human weakness is the reluctance to read, study and learn from the past and then use what was learned to move forward. It pays to check the review mirror.

One big difference today is the speed at which information can be obtained, presented and processed. What does this have to do with the beef business? Sister operations - swine or poultry - compete with beef for the consumer market share.

Food options continue to expand, even to the current issues of what actually is meat. Does the meat have to come from an animal that breathes, reproduces and eats?

Grain remains a relatively inexpensive source of feed, a feed source the cattle industry competes for with swine, poultry and humans. The human use of grain and plant products has expanded far beyond food use, a cause to spend time pausing and pondering.

If one broadens the grass world to forage, forage that once was expected to feed livestock today perhaps is a biofuel. Where do cattle fit? As one looks at all plants, considerable time has been spent on the yield of seed, and less emphasis has been placed on forage yield.

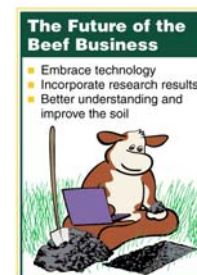
As plants are selected, genetically or managerially, to maximize seed production, the potential edible nutritional products contained in the leaves and stems may be minimized, resulting in decreased forage quality or even limited acceptability as a grazing plant. When selection is focused on forage production, forage for biofuels is not high-quality forage for livestock.

That is a lot to ponder.

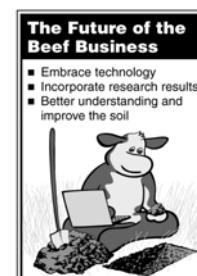
Perhaps I could add three areas that need to be pondered for the future. The first is that beef producers need to embrace technology to:

- Obtain meaningful metrics that support management
- Discover new genomic advantages
- Implement successful methodologies in field and pasture sourcing
- Measure and review genetic and environmental interactions
- Follow animals throughout the entire production chain

## Images



The Future of the Beef Business



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- Use data to drive and provide vitality within the plant and animal genome
- Provide sustainable practices for resources while producing high-quality food

The second area is that beef producers need to incorporate research results that:

- Refocus delivery methods
- Engage mobile technology
- Update data access methods and speed
- Allow the multiple classroom environments to expand knowledge
- Share data and information 24/7 via web-based portals to extend classroom learning environments into tangible production and experiential settings
- Connect and prepare future generations for outcomes and decisions made now

The third area is a better understanding and improvement of the very soil on which forage and livestock thrive to:

- Preserve natural resources
- Find and utilize symbiotic relationships within production systems
- Nurture producer/consumer relationships
- Invest in sustainable decisions that boost soil health and productivity
- Find plant rotations that lower input costs and increase per-acre outputs
- Develop complementary diverse production models using available nutrients and moisture that integrate well with expanded genomic evaluation and meet consumer desires

Ponder these thoughts and add in some reflection on a strong business sense and managerial fine-tuning. The future beef business will utilize more technology, more research and a better soil/plant model, coupled with more business planning and expanded markets.

The beef business is a low-margin business. Having said that, the incorporation of more technology into low-margin businesses is a challenge. Profitable beef means utilizing key financial tools integrated with managerial flexibility.

In closing, the cow-calf business is a grass-based business. Three questions arise:

- Is the future of beef a residual, low-margin side business of crop agriculture?
- Is the future of beef a residual, low-input side business of grassland agriculture?
- Is the future of beef a business that measures inputs and outputs while producing a food product recognized for its nutritional value and eating pleasure?

All three are evident today. So, we should ponder about the future. The cow-calf business is not a simple business with cookie-cutter solutions. The business means hard work with low margins, low inputs and no excess. Keep pondering soil, forage and beef.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension 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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