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BeefTalk: Data are the Foundation for Developing Cattle Goals

Data help guide farm and ranch decisions.

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Farm and/or ranch decisions usually are based on two choices: data or "gut feeling."

Choosing the latter means choices that essentially drift with the beef industry because "gut feeling" is a product of comfort within the beef industry environment. For cow-calf producers, comfort within the business is good.

And along with comfort, the cow-calf enterprise shifts with the gradual changes within the industry. Essentially, individual production is pulled toward industry average, thus the commodity business.

The real challenge comes when a producer wants to take the reins and maneuver the cow-calf enterprise in a direction set by the producer, not the industry. This requires data on which to base decisions and formulate new goals.

So, was the decision correct? What was the consequence to the business? Those questions are the fundamental reason beef producers gathered and formed associations to help guide and collect data for the genetic improvement of cattle.

Data is the Foundation for Developing Cattle Goals

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Since 1985, I have worked with the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association (NDBCIA), an association with a focused mission to improve cattle. The producer-members were adamant that the data generated be correct and presented so producers could use and understand the data. The outcome was the beginning of CHAPS, a records program offered as a service of the NDBCIA and North Dakota State University Extension.

The acronym CHAPS means Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software. CHAPS has been utilized worldwide for 30-plus years.

The CHAPS program assists producers in reviewing herd data, providing a quality and depth of business sense within the cow-calf sector. In fact, if a bad day presents itself, all I need to do is think about the many, many producers I have the enjoyment to work with, and what was bad can become insignificant.

The CHAPS facts and figures can be extensive. The herd analysis reports pretty well tell the story. The "Herd Summary" starts with a quick review of the number of cows exposed, total cows kept for calving, number of cows aborted, number of cows open, number of cows calving, number of cows losing their calf and the number of cows weaning calves.

The actual written inventory numbers are a huge step for beef producers entering the world of production records. Step one always is to count the cows, calves and bulls. Once the inventory is known, step two calculates values for traits that give producers a quick assessment as to the general reproductive and production status of the herd.

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For typical CHAPS users, the pregnancy percentage has been 93.7 percent, pregnancy loss percentage 0.58 percent, calving percentage 93.1 percent, calf death loss 3 percent and calf crop or weaning percentage 91 percent. A quick glance at one's own herd data can identify any significant issues.

The "Calving Distribution Table" is part of the "Herd Summary" report and is perhaps the most telling data table for the herd. Essentially, the cattle are sorted by age and the date that they calve. The table displays the number of calves that were born within each age of cow and 21-day calving period within the herd.

If you do not have a calving table, spend time to produce one from your calving book. After doing that, asking CHAPS to calculate the table for you makes the process much easier.

Information from the calving table will reveal which cows to market, the number of cows calving late, the cows advancing in age and the average actual weaning weight for each age of cow. The 21-day calving interval is noted as well. With a quick glance, a herd can be evaluated and, depending on how deeply one wants to market the problem cattle, the decisions can be made as to which cows need to be identified as market cattle.

The "Herd Comparison" page is another important data piece. It shows benchmarks for critical success factors ranging from production to reproduction to total performance. For example, the replacement rate, currently at 14.9 percent for CHAPS producers, is indicative of how aggressive the producer is in converting breeding cows to market cows. Keeping the replacement rate low would be indicative of a producer who has been able to manage the cow herd as a very productive cow herd.

Remember, CHAPS is the evaluation of production data, but the financial portfolio is always very complex for any producer. One simply cannot indicate what particular point makes or breaks an operation.

As young students come through campuses and learn at least the academic side of the beef business, the tendency is to jump fast, buy quickly and sign the loan paper. Fortunately, producers are available who can lend wisdom to the cattle business based on data. Talk to them.

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

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EPS - color - Data is the Foundation for Developing Cattle Goals (NDSU_Extension_BeefTalk_101818_color.eps - 400.51 Kb)

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