

The Extension Connection

By Megan Vig

As calving season approaches, some of the traits we tend to forget about as soon as we can get the calf to suckle is udder suspension and teat size. This week, I share more on the topic from Kris Ringwall, NDSU Extension Beef Specialist.

The new Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Guidelines provide ample explanations and diagrams as how to score udder suspension and teat size. As described by BIF, udder and teat quality are among the most important functional traits of beef females. Udder suspension and teat size scores are numerical values that reflect differences in udder and teat quality. Udder suspension scores are subjective assessments of udder support and range from 9 (very small) to 1 (very large).

As with all subjective scores, the person doing the scoring will vary the range of scores, but generally, the recording of the relative difference within the trait being evaluated is noteworthy. The Dickinson Research Extension Center has not evaluated cows regularly for pendulous udders and large teats, which shorten the productive life of a cow. However, the switch to May calving limited chute and ease of pen accessibility, and large, pendulous udders and teats that were difficult for a newborn calf to nurse are not acceptable. Generally, the calf will nurse one or two quarters and the remaining quarters will dry up or become problematic.

As with any scoring system, begin by looking at your cattle to see differences. After the initial walk-through and becoming comfortable with the amount of variation present in the heifers, I scored them. The average score was 8 for udder suspension and 7.8 for teat size, perhaps typical of young cows weaning their first calves. All first calf-heifers has sound udders. With time, the heifers will mature slowly and each udder will do the same. I already could see in those-lower scoring heifers the beginning of a challenge.

While I reviewed the udders, I also noticed the variation in the quantity and quality of the cows' hair coat to combat the cold and harsh winter. Some first-calf heifers had good, solid hair coats and some did not. I regret not scoring the hair coat because hair condition is an indication of animal health. Efforts at finding comfort and lowering stress directly relate to how a cow or calf is clothed to meet the demands of the environment.

Well-fed cattle produce a lot of heat, particularly when fed high-roughage feedstuffs. As weather gets colder, the frost eventually will settle on their backs, and those well-insulated cows will look like walking frost balls. Inside, underneath that winter hair coat, is a very warm, comfortable cow that really is not stressed by the cold. She does not need to depend on constant eating, but rather, eats what she needs and returns to a protected, comfortable spot on the range or quietly ruminates and waits for spring. Contrast that to thin, poor-conditioned cattle that have not developed a decent hair coat. They are not comfortable; they are stressed and they are forced to eat more feed to maintain their body temperature.

Now would be a good time to look at your cattle and evaluate hair coats. Add those with poor hair coats to the list of potential high-input cattle to sell if the need arises. While you are out, evaluate body condition scores, and udder and teats during the calving season. Remember, data not recorded is knowledge left behind.