

Get back to basics: The purpose of a cow

THE last few years in the cow-calf business have been breathtaking. Several factors have created a shortage of beef cows and pushed prices to historic levels. In some markets, calf prices have tripled from a few years ago, so everyone must be getting rich. Some are and some are not, depending on whether their production philosophy is geared toward production per animal or toward maximizing profit.

Pounds of meat per animal has risen greatly. Carcasses at slaughter plants are as heavy as live weights were a few years ago. Packers love this because they cost less per pound to process than small animals. While packers have pushed for larger cattle, the main reason cattle have gotten bigger is producer acceptance of academia's infatuation with heavier weaning weights.

In the early 1950s, land-grant colleges began to push larger cattle. Part of the rationale was reaction to the snorter dwarf outbreak that decimated some lines of beef cattle, but most of the push came from the belief that larger cattle would give more



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pounds to sell and more profit.

Early recommendations centered on cultural practices, such as creep feeding, earlier calving and hormone implants, but soon progressed to genetics using performance testing and sires throwing heavy weaning-weight calves.

Average weight at weaning increased rapidly with some unintended consequences: Cow weights increased, and pounds of calf weaned per pound of cow exposed went down. The bigger cow selected for high milk production has a high nutrient demand just to maintain body mass, even when she is not lactating. She also has lower fertility and produces fewer pounds of calf per pound of her body weight.

■ Data collected by Southeast Integrated

Resource Management suggests an area of forage correctly stocked with cows will produce 50% more value of calves when stocked with 1,000-pound cows than 1,500-pound cows. An area of grass can support more small cows than large; the smaller cows produce lighter calves, but more of them, and the calves sell for more per pound. This information is presented in my book "How to Not Go Broke Ranching."

I have caught flak in the past for my views on the purpose and value of the beef cow, and I will step on more toes with this column. The purpose of a beef animal is not to "meet the demands of the trade" or "preserve the beef industry." The purpose of beef animals is to create wealth by increasing the value of forage, especially low-cost forage growing out in the rough.

Given good management, the beef cow can profitability convert this material into valuable nutrient-dense food. A secondary benefit, perhaps even more valuable in the long term, is the ability of grazing animals to have positive effects on the health of

natural resources (soil, plants and water). Properly grazed animals increase soil organic matter content, which increases the water-holding capabilities of soil and reduces both flooding and drought effects.

Few agricultural endeavors can compete financially with cows that have been selected to thrive on an all-forage ration and are managed to be in sync with nature.

These animals, with good grazing management, will require a minimum of inputs and thus maximize profitability. The same type of cattle and management can be very profitably used in more productive areas.

Crop residues are a valuable resource that are being largely wasted in many prime cropping areas. Returning cattle to these areas as part of a pasture-crop rotation, as was once the standard, could do a great deal toward reducing soil loss and nutrient pollution and creating a stable, productive and profitable agricultural economy.

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