

RANGE BEEF COW SYMPOSIUM XX – MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

You Can Calve in June

Rancher Paul Redd has made Mother Nature his partner. Redd, who manages 1,200 cows on 250,000 acres of public and private land on the Colorado-Utah border, now calves in June.

“We finally admitted we were violating our own principles, after 50 years,” he told attendees of the 2007 Range Beef Cow Symposium (RBCS) in Fort Collins, Colo. Half of Redd’s cows produce registered bulls and heifers for an annual April bull sale. The other half is comprised of commercial cows. The cows winter on the desert and summer in the mountains.

“We were using Mother Nature to help us find the best-producing cows by culling those that did not wean a calf each year,” he said. “We decided to build a cow herd adapted to work efficiently in our environment.”

At the same time, Redd said, they ignored the high cost of forcing an arbitrary calving date.

“We wanted March/April calves,” he said. “The ‘green’ started in March, but there wasn’t enough

**Paul Redd**

to get a mouthful until May. Cows were calving when there was not enough quality forage to support her and her new calf. We knew that. We were forever trying various supplements and/or substitutes for the range, adding \$50 to \$150 per cow per winter.”

Redd changed to June calving for his commercial cows to lower costs, use less labor, have less stress on cows and cowboys, and provide

more markets and options of what and when to sell.

“We use less supplements,” he shared. “In the past four years, our cows have received only a mineral with urea. In order to have good reproduction, the cows must be in good shape, a 5 or better on body condition score, at calving and breeding.”

Redd said June-calving cows need much less attention, which saves on labor.

“Cows still must survive the spring, the long walk to water and range forage that is sparse and weathered. But, without a calf at side it is easier,” he explained. “We have better-milking cows. The calf is born easier, and [the] calf survival rate is better. The calf is dropped in green pasture in warm weather.”

More market options and marketing flexibility with younger, lighter calves is also a plus. Redd said June calves have time to meet many different markets and different market dates, including being sold off the cow, going to pasture or going to the feedlot. He

sees a stronger calf market, even a premium, for his four-weight calves over five- and six-weight calves. Often, four-weights gross more per head.

“We cannot brag about the weaning weights of our calves, but we can feel good about their weight per day of age and how well they sell,” he said.

The downfall, he added, is pregnancy rates are 2%-4% lower than previously.

“We hope to provide higher-quality feed by returning in September and October to re-growth in pastures grazed in June and July. Some forage should still be growing with better overall value,” he said. “Even though we experienced lower pregnancy rates, our total number of calves weaned per cow bred increased slightly due to better calf survival. We would not give up the lower expenses, lower labor, lower stress, greater marketing options or the improvement in quality of life.”

— by Barb Baylor Anderson

Table 1: Cost analysis of production systems as an effect of corn price

Item	Calf-fed	Yearling	SEM	\$2.50 per bu.		
Steer cost, \$	846.84 ^a	739.74 ^b	4.18			
Interest ¹ , \$	30.42 ^a	61.52 ^b	1.26			
Feed cost, \$	189.93 ^a	144.20 ^b	6.60			
Yardage, \$	58.94 ^a	31.58 ^b	1.57			
Total cost ² , \$	1,155.33 ^a	1,184.43 ^b	8.18			
COG ³ , \$/cwt.	52.71 ^a	47.08 ^b	1.35			
				\$3.50 per bu.		
Steer cost, \$	782.15 ^a	666.73 ^b	6.23			
Interest ¹ , \$	29.44 ^a	57.66 ^b	1.22			
Feed cost, \$	254.82 ^a	193.51 ^b	8.54			
Yardage, \$	58.94 ^a	31.58 ^b	1.57			
Total cost ² , \$	1,154.49 ^a	1,181.53 ^b	9.52			
COG ³ , \$/cwt.	62.43 ^a	57.76 ^b	1.59			
				\$4.50 per bu.		
Steer cost, \$	722.57 ^a	610.01 ^b	74.91			
Interest ¹ , \$	27.31 ^a	52.58 ^b	1.15			
Feed cost, \$	319.71 ^a	242.83 ^b	10.48			
Yardage, \$	58.94 ^a	31.58 ^b	1.57			
Total cost ² , \$	1,153.95 ^a	1,180.66 ^b	11.07			
COG ³ , \$/cwt.	72.15 ^a	68.79 ^b	1.87			

^{a,b}Means within a row with different superscripts differ (P < 0.05).

¹Interest is the total amount of interest accrued from the animal and all costs of production.

²Includes backgrounding cost from Table 3 plus health costs and cost of death loss.

³COG is the cost of gain for the entire production system.

Note: This is Table 2 from the proceedings of Terry Klopfenstein’s presentation, which is available at www.rangebeefcow.com.

Production Systems

Expansion of the ethanol industry is having a major effect on all of agriculture. According to University of Nebraska animal scientist Terry Klopfenstein, the effect on cattle feeding may be the greatest that segment of the cattle industry has seen in 40 years.

Klopfenstein told the Wednesday morning audience at the 2007 RBCS that ethanol-related changes to cattle feeding economics have raised questions about which kind of

production system is most suitable.

With the availability of relatively cheap corn, the industry had seen a growing share of cattle enter feedlots as calves rather than yearlings. Klopfenstein said the practice had grown to where up to one-third of finished cattle were calf-feds. As ethanol’s demand for corn drove prices higher, there was incentive to utilize forages to put more weight on cattle before they go to feedlots.

What if corn prices remain high? Believing the industry needs to be prepared for that possibility, Klopfenstein and his colleagues summarized eight years of research comparing calf-feds to yearlings and the effects of corn price.

The data suggest something different than what many cattle feeders suspect. Analysis suggests that whether corn is priced at \$2.50, \$3.50 or \$4.50 per bushel, feeding yearlings is more profitable than feeding calf-feds. Increasing corn price generally has little effect on the profitability advantage of yearlings.

“Corn price will affect the price of feeder cattle,” Klopfenstein admitted, “but it is not clear

**Terry Klopfenstein**

Benefits of Weaning Calves at Younger Ages

Barry Dunn designed a graphic called the Ranch Wheel (see Figs. 1 and 2), in which the spokes represent the things that make up the ranch, relayed Trey Patterson at the 20th RBCS. Dunn is the executive director of the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management at Kingsville, Texas.

“The question we have to ask ourselves is what drives this wheel,” Patterson said, adding that often “the things that force us to make managerial decisions on our ranches are stress and conflict, such as droughts, poor markets and high prices.”



Trey Patterson

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Patterson said a possible solution to the stress and conflicts is having an organized decision-making process. For instance, instead of letting drought force management decisions, consider in advance the opportunities weaning calves earlier than normal could offer in different situations.

“There are a couple of different ways to outline early weaning dates,” Patterson said. “Weaning before the start of the breeding season has been shown to improve reproductive performance during the year. Improved reproduction can be due to removal of the sucking stimulus or from improved energy balance of the cattle. Weaning calves late in the breeding season likely will not yield any improvements in reproduction during the year in which calves are weaned.”

Patterson cited a study developed by a group of scientists from South Dakota State University, North Dakota State University and the University of Wyoming to evaluate early weaning of beef calves. The scientists used a two-year period to evaluate the correlation of weaning dates to the body condition score of cows.

“Calf gains were similar overall, but the early-weaned calves were significantly more efficient at converting feed to gain in two of the three locations,” Patterson said. “Finishing performance was not markedly different between treatments, except early-weaned calves finished at an average 32 days younger with 51 additional days on feed.”

The commercial cattle business is run on weight, Patterson said, and weight is an important factor in selling calves. The Padlock Ranch, where Patterson is employed, weans earlier than normal if necessary to manage body condition score and to manage grass during drought conditions.

“Weaning calves early is not a magic bullet,” Patterson said. “Every business needs to make this calculation given current costs and markets to make a wise decision. Do not forget to look at the whole system when making a decision on time of weaning.”

—by *Tosha Powell*

that there will be large profits for backgrounded cattle — putting more of the weight on with forages, residues and byproducts. We just don’t have good historical data at high corn prices to make predictions, because we haven’t had high corn prices.”

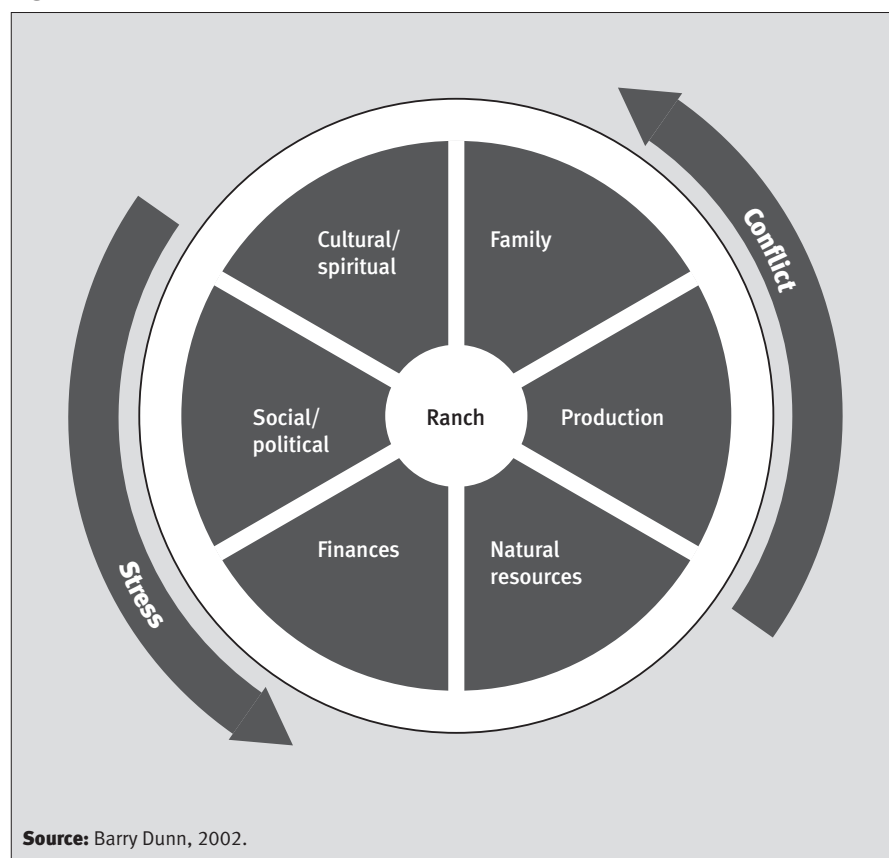
For a rancher wondering whether it is more profitable to market calves or yearlings, the answer depends on the type of cattle. Lighter-weight cattle, like those born in late spring or early summer, fit a yearling system best. Other considerations for having a successful system include the availability and cost of grazed or harvested feed for the winter, and the cost of grass.

Klopfenstein said pasture rental rates have increased and are likely to climb higher. He also advised consideration of whether supplementation on grass would be needed to achieve expected summer gain. And transportation costs for harvested feed or hauling cattle to and from summer pasture must be added to the total.

The choice of production system will depend on the resources individual producers have at hand, Klopfenstein concluded.

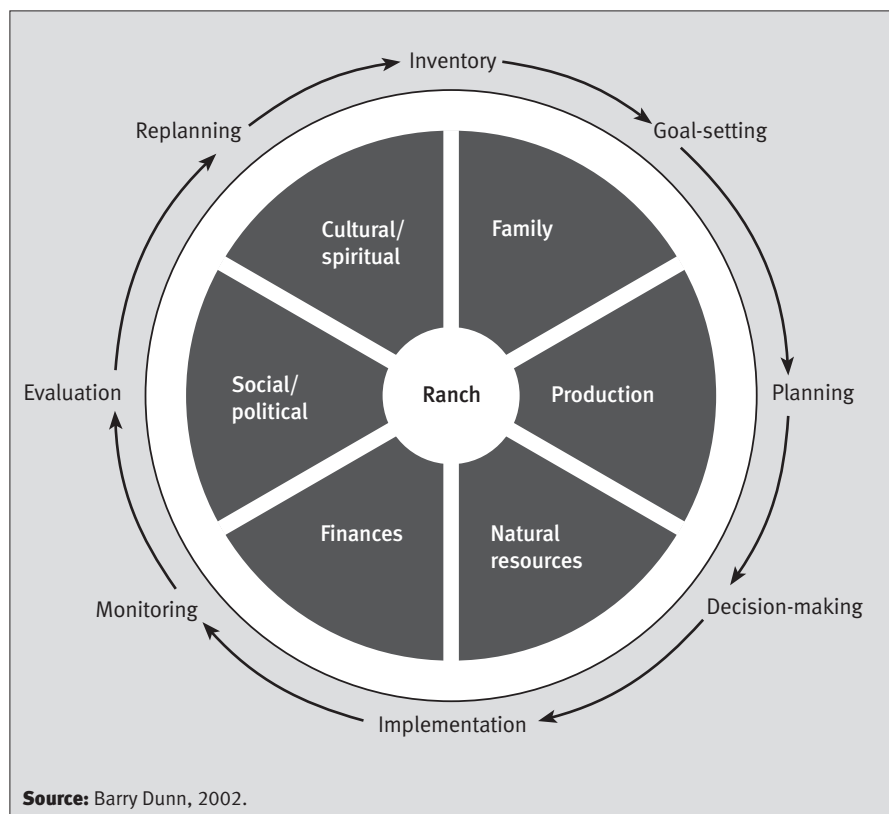
—by *Troy Smith*

Fig. 1: The Ranch Wheel



Source: Barry Dunn, 2002.

Fig. 2: Integrated Resource Management decision-making process



Source: Barry Dunn, 2002.

