

# Beef Talk: Trends for pounds weaned per cow exposed

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Conversation guides us, particularly when someone casually notes the ranch had just marketed a 91% calf crop with an average weight of 568 pounds (lb.) for 192-day-old steer calves.

Silence prevailed until the neighbor asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yep," the rancher replied, "but I was just average. Maybe someday I can manage my way to the upper third."

Another rancher offered that the culling process this year was "deeper than usual, and we hope the hay supply will hold over the core cow herd." The

hope is for a mild winter and a return to a normal growing season to raise some more of those 550-lb.-plus steer calves.

The dialogue continues, which is a good thing, but the comments are generally not data-driven, which is critical in assessing the status of the cow enterprise. The best way to make cow-culling decisions is to access and utilize production benchmarks.



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Knowledge allows for the setting of goals, and the process of reaching a goal occurs through evaluation, modification and implementation of appropriate management of genetics.

The North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association (NDBCIA) recently updated the CHAPS (Cow Herd Appraisal of Performance Software) benchmarks, a running five-year average of herds in the CHAPS program for a minimum of three years. CHAPS is an inventory-based program and does not allow for the omission of cow records because the program is based on a total-herd inventory. Reproductive and performance data are collected and processed within CHAPS and provide a good indication of today's upper Great Plains beef cattle production.

Simple data is best, so if a producer wants a quick evaluation of where the herd is, pounds weaned per cow exposed is a good way to get an overall feel for the herd data because the value combines reproductive and performance data.

#### An example

Let's look at the benchmark. Although annual trends are evident in the database, the bottom-line benchmark number — pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed — is 498 lb. Simply rounding the number up to 500 lb. would be nice, but I will leave that to the chitchatting.

The benchmark for pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed has been quite consistent. Historically (10-plus years ago), the benchmark was 501 lb. for 2003, 498 lb. for 2004, 500 lb. for 2005, and 502 lb. for 2006 and 2007.

Has the industry changed much? Not really. In 2008, the benchmark for pounds weaned per cow exposed was again at 500 lb., and it was 507 lb. in 2009, 505 lb. in 2010, 503 lb. in 2011 and 501 lb. in 2012.

Interestingly, the average producer has not been able to sustain the 500-lb. threshold in recent years. In 2013,

the benchmark dropped below 500 lb. to 499 lb. The chitchat did not pick up that difference, and the thought was still at 500 lb. But in 2014, pounds weaned per cow exposed dropped to 496. It dropped again in 2015 to 495 lb. and again in 2016 to 494 lb. This was a somewhat challenging trend, although 2017 did see an increase back up to 498 lb. weaned per cow exposed.

In the 1990s, pounds weaned per cow exposed was even lower, suggesting the beef industry is fairly dynamic in annual production characteristics. But, in the big picture, production traits are relatively consistent. Pounds weaned per cow exposed, as well as other production traits, are very informative and can be utilized to “benchmark” current herd production within an individual producer’s herd.

As has been noted, for every cow exposed, CHAPS producers are weaning 498 lb. of calf. The number itself is not as critical as is the ability for producers to gauge their own level of production.

Goals are set and measured against the CHAPS benchmarks. Attaining greater production or even just holding even may be the goal. Knowledge allows for the setting of goals, and the process of reaching a goal occurs through evaluation, modification and implementation of appropriate management or genetics.

However, financial and economic evaluations are needed to complement production traits to truly assess a cattle operation. No absolute answers are available on what a particular ranch should produce. The academic answer is optimization.

In reality, the need is to grow profitable cattle a producer can appreciate and that still meet industry needs. Cattle need to convert resources into cash that sustains an operation. Each producer gets to set goals, and the road map to meeting the goals should be based on data that give one knowledge to stay in business.

One thing is for sure: Those “naysayers” who claim you can’t wean 500 lb. per cow exposed to the bull need to look again. Their neighbor may well be filling more trucks with pounds of calf. Chitchatting is good, but remember, to truly measure progress, producers need to collect, analyze and report data, set goals and repeat.

May you find all your ear tags.



**Editor’s Note:** For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent ([www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory](http://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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