

THE DIGESTIVE TRACT

Pounds of calf weaned and feed costs

by Dan Shike, University of Illinois



The year 2020 will be forever etched into our minds. It was a year full of unexpected challenges,

seemingly around every corner. The beef industry certainly was not immune to the events of 2020.

Although it is a bit cliché, I do believe that with every challenge comes an opportunity. Cow numbers are projected to trend

downward and calf prices upward as we enter this next cattle cycle.

I encourage and challenge each cow-calf producer to evaluate your operation and track key performance indicators. You should not only track year-over-year trends, but also compare to regional benchmarks to know how your operation stacks up. There are many formulas for success, but identifying key areas where your operation is lagging the competition will likely help you focus your management.

I suspect some producers get very excited about digging into the numbers and evaluating the operation's financials and production parameters. However, I am also fairly certain some might be ready to stop reading this column

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and flip the page. Hopefully, even if this isn't your favorite topic, you will read until the end and take the opportunity to set some goals for the upcoming year.

Pounds weaned

Profitable cow-calf operations are guaranteed to have one thing in common — they make more money than they spend. However, these operations often get there in very different ways. One of the most common metrics, or performance indicators, evaluated is pounds (lb.)

of calf weaned per exposed female.

It is hard to argue with the merit of this analysis in a commercial cow-calf operation. There is no question that reproductive success is key to profitability. There are several opportunities for good management (or bad) to influence weaning percentage. Pregnancy rates, pregnancy loss, calving loss and preweaning mortality all ultimately affect how many calves are weaned.

If your weaned calf percentage is

Continued on page 46



lower than you want it to be, you need to identify where the greatest opportunity for improvement is. Are your pregnancy rates low? Are you having late-term abortions? Are you losing calves at birth or prior to weaning?

The majority of the variation in these parameters can be attributed to differences in management (nutrition and health) of the herd. Tracking cow body condition score (BCS) throughout the year and working with your veterinarian to develop a herd health production calendar are key to success.

Notice I have not even discussed the pounds part of pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed. I am not saying pounds are not important; clearly they are. However, you should first focus on the reproductive aspect before you address the pounds.

Oftentimes, when too much focus is placed on the “pursuing the pounds” part of the equation (genetics for growth and milk), the

reproductive side of the equation can suffer. Selecting for more growth and milk and not providing the nutrition and environment to realize that genetic potential will almost certainly lead to problems.

The genetic progress that has been made in the Angus breed is staggering. However chasing fads or single-trait selection is not the answer. The development of a maternal value index (\$M) and a combined value index (\$C) offers producers the tools to implement multi-trait selection focusing on profit.

Feed costs

Feed costs represent the largest cost to an operation and significantly drive profitability. These costs can be divided into three major categories: grazing costs, raised feed costs and purchased feed costs.

Depending on the region of the country you live in, the relative proportion of cost in each category

and the total cost within each category can vary greatly. Thus, it is important to have regional benchmarks with which to compare. Unfortunately, those data can be difficult to obtain in some regions. Contacting state beef extension specialists in your region is a good place to start to try to track down that information.

Once you have compiled your feed cost information and compared to regional benchmarks, you can identify areas of concern. Grazing management strategies, supplementation strategies, hay storage and feeding method, and use of byproducts and alternative feeds are all potential management practices that could be modified to address high feed costs.

Obviously, nutrition affects cow BCS and has the potential to significantly affect reproductive success. Thus, simply cutting back on supplemental feed or increasing stocking rates may not be the answer. It is critical to approach the

nutritional management of the cow herd from an optimization standpoint. Bottom line, if you do not know what your feed costs are, it is hard to know where to start.

In summary

If you really want to dig into this, there are certainly other financial metrics and production parameters that warrant tracking. However, if you have struggled to get started on tracking your progress, pounds of calf weaned per cow and the three feed cost categories of grazing costs, raised feed costs and purchased feed costs provide a good place to start. ■

Editor's note: “The Digestive Tract” is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* focused on nutrition for the beef cattle life cycle. Dan Shike is associate professor in animal sciences at the University of Illinois.