



Beef Talk

by **KRIS RINGWALL**, *Extension beef specialist, North Dakota State University*

Are your bulls getting a balanced ration?

Cash costs are up a little bit or, some say, a big bit. However, the real answer is in the checkbook. Monitoring costs should be an ongoing process in all operations, and any significant spike should be managed to minimize the effect.

However, the real costs can go unnoticed. If one is not careful, one can cut corners on things that really have significant effects on production without having a significant effect on cost. One of those discussions could be on the cost of supplements or feed in general.

After noticing the upward spiral on grain prices, I reviewed the receipt file we keep at the Dickinson Research Extension Center for commercial bull feed supplement. Bull supplements are important.

The bulls do quite well on a high-forage diet. In an effort to assure a well-balanced diet and proper condition come spring, the bulls receive a commercial supplement.

Managing an inventory of 26 bulls representing four breeds is no small task. The bulls are maintained in different paddocks, depending on their

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age, condition, weight, breed type and attitude.

The bulls are penned five bulls per paddock through winter. In the fall, they graze as a herd and, generally, get along quite well.

It won't be long before they start noting the signs of spring. Although cattle are not real sensitive to daylight length, unlike some domestic and many wild animals, the longer daylight hours, warmer weather, eventual calving and a return of estrus in the cows will heighten the bulls' attitudes.

But for now, they are somewhat

content to remain confined. However, for most bulls, confinement is an image because, physically, most bulls could undo or simply go through many of the fences and gates they are kept behind.

At the Extension center, bulls enjoy commercial feed supplements, which most would assume have increased in cost. Interestingly, in fall 2005, the supplement cost was \$4.20 per 50-pound (lb.) bag. In winter 2006, the supplement cost was still \$4.20.

In spring 2007, the same supplement cost was \$5.84. Toward the end of 2007, we purchased the same supplement and have been feeding 4 lb. to 10 lb. of the supplement (depending on the bull's size and condition) during winter 2008. The price this year is \$4.83.

The 2008 supplement price actually dropped from last year, but it is up a little from the winters of 2005 and 2006. The point is, managers need to pay attention to details.

Cost management is critical, and the obvious is not always obvious. As producers respond to increased costs involved with the beef business, it is critical to sort costs much like production.

Poor-producing cattle need to be replaced with better-producing cattle. Cash invested that does not contribute to the operation should be shifted.

It is critical to be astute enough to know what cash to shift vs. the cash that is fueling the operation. Failure to invest in adequate nutrition programs, health protocols, and proper breeding and genetics will spiral an operation down, as will overinvestment.

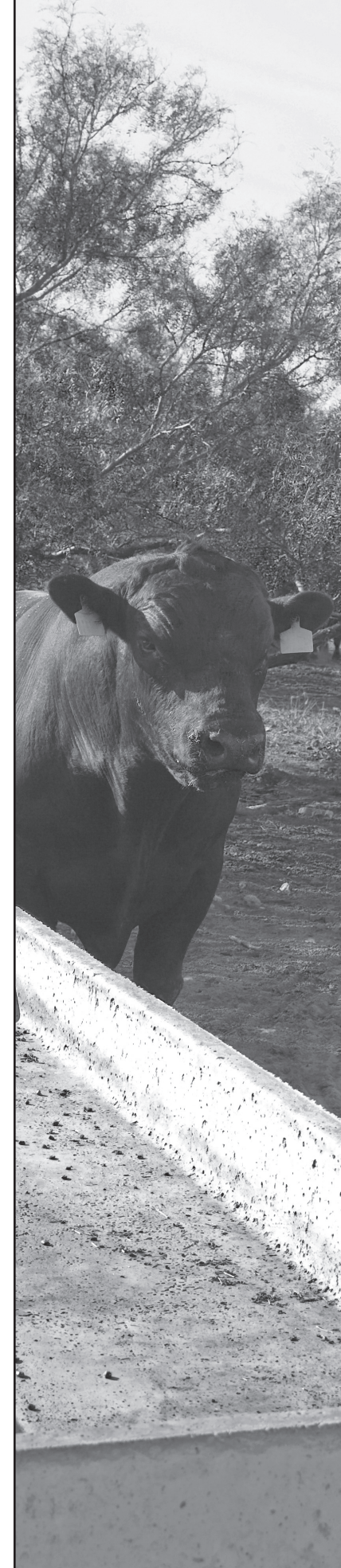
A quick review of prices from last year has many commodities escalating significantly. The challenge is to get the pencil out and start figuring. To eliminate costly mistakes, the business of agriculture requires decisions based on data, not quick blurbs or coffee talk.

For the center, the bulls will continue to get their supplements along with plans for active breeding this summer. The replacement bulls have not been bought, but good bulls are worth feeding. Getting some extra cows bred by healthy, well-conditioned, genetically superior bulls should be a goal of every cow-calf producer.



Editor's Note: Addressing the past, present and future state of the beef cattle business, "Beef Talk" is a weekly column distributed by the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Agricultural Communication office. Ringwall is executive secretary of the NDBCIA, director of the Dickinson Research Extension Center and an NDSU Extension beef specialist. An archive of columns can be found at www.BeefTalk.com, and your comments are always welcome.

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