

Beef Talk: what's changing in the beef industry?

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What is changing in the beef industry? Reviewing the data from the Cow Herd Appraisal of Performance Software (CHAPS) program, beef herds seem to be fairly constant. The reproductive performance based on cows exposed

is remarkably sound, and the output, as measured by age-adjusted weaning weight, is holding consistent and maybe even showing a slightly increasing trend.

Since 1990, 93.5% of the cows were getting pregnant and weaned a 90.2%

calf crop that weighed 613 pounds (lb.) adjusted to 205 days of age.

Five-year trends

If one were to look at five-year increments, there may be trends within the data. However, for the most part, cow herds are performing very consistently. From 1990 to 1994, 94.3% of the cows were getting pregnant and weaned a 91.3% calf crop that weighed 606 lb. adjusted to 205 days of age.

From 1995 to 1999, 92.7% of the cows were getting pregnant and weaned an 88.3% calf crop that weighed 589 lb. adjusted to 205 days of age. From 2000 to 2004, 93.3% of the cows were getting pregnant and weaned an 89.9% calf crop that weighed 612 lb. adjusted to 205 days of age.

From 2005 to 2009, 93.5% of the cows were getting pregnant and weaned a 91% calf crop that weighed 636 lb. adjusted to 205 days of age. Since 2010, 93.7% of the cows were getting pregnant and weaned a 90.6% calf crop that weighed 625 lb. adjusted to 205 days of age.

That's pretty good. These data reflections come from the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension Service through the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association (NDBCIA). The NDBCIA calculates the typical performance of beef cattle herds by analyzing those herds that utilize the CHAPS program.

The Extension Service has been keeping records since 1963 through the NDBCIA and presents these annual evaluations as five-year rolling benchmark values for average herd performance for several traits. Although the individual yearly averages are good, the concept of a rolling five-year average provides a firmer benchmark because it buffers against quick jumps or slumps in the data.

I'll be repeating myself, but comparing the 20-year average to the current production values, the herd reproductive performance is holding well and growth is up slightly. These typical values are fairly reflective of beef cattle production in the upper Great Plains and for those herds that traditionally calve in late winter to early spring.

Within these herds for the past 20-plus years, cows are averaging 5.7 years of age, with a culling rate of 14%, replacement rate of 17.6% and a calf death loss of 3.5%. Therefore, the herds have tended to grow slightly.

The average weaning date averaged 195 days of age and the calves had an average weight per day of age of 2.9 lb. Currently, calves are being weaned at a slightly younger age and have a tendency to have slightly more growth.

The concept of benchmarking is a great tool for those who manage beef cow herds to incorporate into

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their managerial tool kits. The concept does not drive a producer to set an operational routine, but it does allow for the regular evaluation of those traits that are indicative of the performance level of the herd.

Reproduction is a biological function and an excellent indicator of how well the management plan or genetics fit the environment in which a producer is trying to work. Once the benchmarks are known and the corresponding costs documented, a producer is well on the way to better management.

A producer needs to decide what level of performance is expected and how much one is willing to give to get that performance. Performance is really herd output, which is a function of age and growth.

Input costs must be measured against herd output, which is a function of weight times the price of market steers, heifers, cows and bulls. All these numbers determine the financial and economic well-being of the operation.

Without knowing what typical herd performance should be, evaluating the herd is difficult. In many cases, producers are not set up or have difficulty collecting all the information required for keeping sound managerial records. However, collecting what one can is important.

In the short term right now, the sway of the market seems very positive. However, the market alone will not sustain a viable beef operation, regardless of individual desires. The beef business and the farms and ranches that make the beef industry are long-term operations.

Guidance is best done by using solid data, reviewing that data and making the subtle changes that keep the operation on course for long-term sustainability and successfully accomplishing operational goals.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact Ringwall at 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to www.ag.ndsu.edu/news/columns/beefstalk/.

Table 1: CHAPS 5-year trends

	Pregnancy percentage	Weaning percentage	Adjusted 205-day weight
1990-1994	94.3%	91.3%	606 lb.
1995-1999	92.7%	88.3%	589 lb.
2000-2004	93.3%	89.9%	612 lb.
2005-2009	93.5%	91.0%	636 lb.
2010-2012	93.7%	90.6%	625 lb.