

# Beef Talk: Pitching hay or doing homework; the choice

by **KRIS RINGWALL**,  
*beef specialist, NDSU*  
*Extension Service*



Recent “Beef Talk” columns have caused me to ponder more about the dynamics of the beef business.

The answers seem at our fingertips, but the solutions are far off at times. The business of beef initiates within a very large, decentralized base of

independent producers. The model is good, but inherent within the vastness of environments in which the beef industry functions, change is slow.

Perhaps that, too, is good. Imagine sitting by a glass pane, full of ideas, watching the world go by, but with no

way to open the door to go to the other side. The door may be there, but it is unnoticed. Each person gets to decide. When asked to feed the world or watch the world, I guess the choice is ours.

## **The value of good records**

As a youngster, I fed cattle with a pitchfork from a hayrack. I had no concept of the value of the feed, how much to feed, how much was wasted or how heavy the cows were. I didn’t know the value of the cow or the profit when the calves were sold.

I knew a truck would haul the calves to the sale barn, and there would be fewer to feed. It made me happy. Life was good. I had no documental evidence of good animal care. I just pitched until the cows and calves looked content or I got tired, knowing I would be back tomorrow to pitch some more.

---

**The business of beef is  
knowledge based on data.  
Data allow for the long-  
term solutions within a  
complex production chain.  
What is the largest and  
heaviest chain that holds  
a beef operation back?**

---

Recently, I attended a good educational insurance session regarding options for ranchers and farmers. I could not help but ponder the significance of the records required to provide the data for the examples used. The data were not complicated, but numerous questions were asked to fill in all the blanks to run the estimate for the appropriate coverage.

Things have changed since the days of pitching hay. The pondering thought was this: The business side of agriculture is not simple. The requests for documentation and inputs are quite demanding, and to know the financial success of the beef operation, cattle producers need to keep records.

Likewise, to know cattle nutrition, cattle producers look up the nutritional requirements of cattle. To know cattle genetics, cattle producers look up expected progeny differences (EPDs) and sample cattle DNA. To understand cattle response to disease, cattle producers submit tissue and fluids for analysis of enzymes and other proteins.

To know how cattle reproduce, cattle producers learn and implement appropriate synchronization methods. To know the range plants, cattle producers seek a botanist for input. To know the environmental requirements, cattle producers conference with professional engineers. I remember pitching tons of slough weeds, and

## is ours

the cows and calves seemed to like it. I remember keeping an eye out for the bull because he was smaller than the cows. I remember a dead calf, a conclusion based on the amount and location of bleeding.

I remember never worrying about breeding cows because the bull seemed to understand that. I remember not worrying about grass plants; each forkful was filled with plenty of green stems. I never worried about the cow manure because that seemed rather trivial. I was clueless, but the cows and calves had a good home and a good caregiver.

Have I changed? Yes. For the better? Yes.

### Learn to engage

The current challenge for beef producers is the dilemma of engaging the ever-demanding need to experience the intensity of operational data or stick to pitching hay. This challenge is individual to each beef producer but collective to the beef industry.

The business of beef is knowledge based on data. Data allow for the long-term solutions within a complex production chain. What is the largest and heaviest chain that holds a beef operation back?

As I sit and ponder the links to the chain, some are small and some are large. Some are strong and some are weak. As the saying goes, a chain can only be as strong as the weakest link. Therefore, in theory, the identification of the weakest link should be a notable effort. The challenge with the fix rests with the justification of the problem and lack of data to fix it.

Unfortunately, if the weight of the chain, once fixed, is too heavy, one only develops new problems. Then the weight of the chain must be lightened. A lighter chain has less strength, however. Maybe a heavy chain is better. Maybe a lighter chain? The choice always has consequences: maybe progress or not.

I guess these are just ponderings, and we end where we began. Imagine sitting by a glass pane, full of ideas, watching the world go by, but with no way to open the door to go to the other side. The door may be there but is unnoticed. Each person gets to decide. When asked to feed the world or watch the world, I guess the choice is ours.

The bottom line: The beef industry is a very large industry and, as individual producers, we have the opportunity to engage the complexity or pitch hay. I enjoyed pitching hay, but times have changed.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://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).

# Don't Miss Out!

Sign up for the Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA by:

- Signing up at [www.angusbeefbulletin.com](http://www.angusbeefbulletin.com) (look for signup in upper left corner); or
- Emailing [bulletinextra@angusbeefbulletin.com](mailto:bulletinextra@angusbeefbulletin.com) with SUBSCRIBE in the subject line.



**The EXTRA is designed to provide news and information electronically to Angus Beef Bulletin subscribers between published issues.**