

Beef Talk: Is there a place for cows in the future?

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Is there a place for cows in the future? The reality of today's agriculture is that it is heavily slanted toward crop production if the land has the potential to be converted to crops. Like it or not, for beef production to expand, the

economics of the beef cow needs to have a threefold increase in net returns to compete with crop production (see the "Beef Talk" column in the July 2014 *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA*, available on the management page at

www.angusbeefbulletin.com/extra). To leave land in hay production, the net return for hay needs to double. These are very unlikable thoughts, but certainly thoughts that will drive the next wave of young agriculturists.

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Is there a place for cows in the future? Yes, but let's visit a bit first about the topic. For cattle or livestock producers, in general, this always has been a difficult question.

What is the purpose of food? Livestock production always has been a part of farming because there always was something the family did not want to eat, so there came the need to have cows, horses, chickens, pigs and all the rest of the livestock fold. Obviously, the conversion of some crops and produce to meat allowed a more complete package for survival and certainly a better balance at the local level of production.

For example, milk that would not keep could be fed to the pigs. The pigs had a longer window of harvest, so thus the balance. One also needs to remind oneself that even the household pet was there to help clean up a hardy meal in exchange for some warmth and a day's help on the farm or ridding the place of unwanted guests.

Modern times

In today's world, one needs to look at the bigger picture and ask the same questions. Not one particular producer has the capacity to produce all that is needed. However, thanks to modern transportation, those same pieces that were so needed on the homestead can now be parceled out around the neighborhood. Therefore, larger operations have fine-tuned the production science behind the intended foods that need to be marketed, so production efforts have become focused.

Within these larger operations, there generally rests a foundational family structure that has good wisdom through a connection to those who actually lived through this needed balance from the past by the needed sharing of resources and need to be efficient so nothing is wasted.

In fact, Ralph Waldo Emerson said it best: "He (the farmer) stands close to nature; he obtains from the earth

the bread and the meat. The food which was not, he causes to be.” That connection to the earth, soil, bread and meat, plus other food is as real today as it was when Emerson wrote his quote.

So why the dilemma? Some would quickly say there is no dilemma. However, by merely asking the question, we start the process of acknowledging that something is awry. The modern, refined approach, at least in the more affluent countries, to the new generation is one of convenience and calculated efficiencies that purchase, measure, sort and process needed inputs into appropriately salable products, including food.

If the assumption that all the purchased inputs always will be available for the growing population models is true, I guess one does not need to be too concerned, so maybe the mud boots, coveralls and other working paraphernalia can be put to rest. However, what if the assumption is not true and all the needed inputs will not be available forever?

Then the new ways break down and one needs to again back up and look for the source of those needed inputs. In the short term, money still seems to be the fix. By increasing one’s willingness to pay, those last few remaining pots of inputs can be wrestled away and consumed. However, what happens when those last few remaining pots go empty? Let’s hope we are smart enough to not get to that point.

Therefore, as was noted, we return to our roots and the generations who understood the need for balance in the agricultural system and ask what made those early farms work. Well, there really is no secret. However, great-grandma and -grandpa did not have names for all the ingredients, but they understood the need to diversify and have balance in the soil, so as Emerson so noted of the farmer: “The food which was not, he causes to be.”

Today, we know more because we have those names and we better understand that the soil is a very large, unfocused mass of living things. Each living thing is doing its part to make sure the pot never goes empty. That seems strange, but in science class, we called that the carbon cycle. Living animals are part of the loop that makes sure the cycle of life does not end.

Cows are part of that cycle, so, yes, cows do have a future.

May you find all your ear tags.

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

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