

# VETERINARY CALL



by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

## My ideal cow

*Frequently, producers will point out their “best cows” to me and comment that they would like more just like them. When I ask what about the cows makes them better than their herdmates, the answers usually emphasize the cows’ own performance.*

The owner will mention traits such as getting bred early each breeding season, staying healthy and in good body condition throughout the year, and giving birth and mothering up with no problems. Typically, good calf performance is also mentioned, but only after the cows’ own low-labor, easy-keeping characteristics are praised.

Based on my own experience and what I learn from ag economists, I think the producers are correctly identifying superior cows. Obviously, having calves that grow well and that have other desirable characteristics is necessary for a cow to be considered among the best. However, a cow with a better-than-average calf at her side that calved late, needed assistance at calving or after calving, or that required excessive feed inputs to maintain body condition will not qualify as being among the best.

The best cows need to thrive on available forage and to present a healthy calf at weaning every year.

### My definition

My list of characteristics that define a best cow starts with heifers that reach puberty at a young age and at a light weight so that they are ready to breed early in their

first breeding season. They need to be fertile and be able to maintain a pregnancy while staying in good body condition on available forage and a reasonable amount of supplementation. They need to calve without assistance, mother up with their calves shortly after they are born, provide adequate colostrum, and have good udder conformation that allows easy suckling.

---

*The best cows need to thrive on available forage and to present a healthy calf at weaning every year.*

---

They then need to resume fertile cycles early enough so they can be bred in the first 21 days of the breeding season and then remain healthy and in good body condition while they maintain that pregnancy until the next calving.

Because high reproductive efficiency (defined as weaning a healthy calf each year) is usually considered the most economically important trait of beef cows, and feed costs are among the highest expenses, identifying and replicating cows that excel at reproduction, calf

care, and maintaining body condition on available forages is key to efficient cow herd production.

Genetic selection, nutritional and health management, and good animal husbandry are all needed to create a herd full of best cows. Successful beef producers gain a great deal of expertise in all of these areas, and rely on other local experts such as their veterinarian, extension specialists, replacement suppliers, forage and grazing advisors, feed suppliers, and fellow cattlemen to keep up with the demands of ever-higher production expectations.

The goal of every producer should be that the herd’s best cows today would be considered average cows in a few years, and a new standard for best cows would be established. This is a daunting goal, but one that helps the beef industry meet the demand to continually improve the efficiency and quality of the meat we produce.

email: [rlarson@vet.k-state.edu](mailto:rlarson@vet.k-state.edu)

*Editor’s Note: Bob Larson is professor of production medicine at Kansas State University.*