

Consider Replacement Heifers For Herds

Cattlemen planning on increasing their herds must consider heifer replacements since the supply of good quality cows for purchase is limited.

"One of the first considerations with heifer replacements is their status in respect to brucellosis," said Dr. Dennis White, livestock specialist with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&M University System. "Calfhood vaccination for Bang's Disease is a must.

"Also, heifers should be bred at 14 to 15 months of age to calve at 24 months. This reduces overhead expenses and increases income," he said. "Several studies have shown that we can produce about one more calf in a cow's lifetime if she calves first as a two-year-old. Also, heifers calving as two-year-olds generally wean heavier calves in their lifetime than those calving for the first time at three years of age."

While records should be a vital part of any heifer replacement program, they are often not available. White suggests a number of pointers to

develop a heifer management program:

1. Heifers too light at weaning generally will not reach sexual maturity by 14-16 months of age.
2. Lightweight heifers at weaning that successfully conceive and calve have more calving difficulties and rebreed slower than heavy weaning heifers.
3. Heifers calving first at two years of age will have 15 to 25 percent more calving problems than those calving as three-year-olds.
4. Heifers that conceive readily and produce a calf early in the calving season continue to breed and calve early and also wean heavier calves throughout their lifetimes.
5. The later a heifer conceives and produces a calf in the calving season, the greater the probability that she will not rebreed later in life.
6. Heifers that produce late season calves tend toward erratic breeding. The most common problem is calf production in alternate years.

White said that selecting the heaviest heifers at weaning without a followup program on their productivity may not increase herd performance. Some research has indicated that heavy weaning heifers are often poor milkers and will not be as productive as those heifers that are only slightly above average in weaning weight.

He recommends developing heifer groups of uniform size and breed type so that they reach about 65 per cent of their mature weight at breeding. In the case of Brahman and Brahman crossbred heifers, this percentage may need to be five to ten per cent higher.

He suggests a feeding program to get heifers to the desired weight level at 14-15 months of age. To do this they must gain one to one and one-fourth pounds per day following weaning. Heifers wintered on small grain pasture should obtain this level of gain; those overwintered on grass hay will probably need five to six pounds of grain to reach the desired weight gain.

Next, put these heifers with bulls for a short breeding period (40 to 60 days) and then cull based on this initial breeding period, advises White. Check with a tax accountant about selling open heifers on a capital gain basis. They obviously are not two years old but were intended for breeding replacements. 