

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Change Isn't Always an Improvement

I have had the privilege of knowing producers who keep getting better at solving the challenge of raising beef cattle to meet the needs of their customers and consumers while improving their own profitability.

However, the ability to routinely figure out when to change and when to maintain current practices seems to be a skill perfected by a relatively small number of people. It is easier to follow a simple response to change — either to try every new technology that comes along, or to keep doing the same thing for decades. That rare person who can figure out which changes will be beneficial and which will be harmful and how to wisely implement change has earned my profound admiration.

Same old thing

The reason maintaining the same production practices over long periods of time is not likely to result in continual success is because factors that impact herd productivity or economic success are rapidly evolving. New disease threats arise while old ones decline; land prices, feed costs, interest rates and labor availability all change and that alters the cost of production. That fluctuation also affects the relative importance of different cost categories; customers change their preferences based on their business; and consumers' desires switch.

Implementing every proposed change is also not likely to result in sustained improvement. Any change in a complex system results in both positive and negative impacts. The combined positive impacts must outweigh the negative ones to be beneficial. Optimization of beef cattle production involves preserving the most valuable resources while increasing the expenditure of less-valued ones.

The challenge producers face is identifying the most-valued and the less-valued resources as they are constantly changing. The wisest innovators recognize that the change in the margin between income and expenses resulting from instituting a change should drive the decision to adopt a new practice. They will also avoid focusing on either the change in value or the change in cost alone without focusing on the impact of the change on both income and cost.

Decade of change

Many innovations and changes in the last few decades have resulted in either increased value of production at little increase in cost, or decreased cost with little decrease in value of

production. Some examples include: using effective vaccines to prevent common diseases, examining bulls for breeding soundness, enhancing grazing management to increase number of grazing days and using dewormers in young stock.

Other innovations and changes have tighter margins which means that adoption is not beneficial in all situations. Some examples include: selecting cows that have the genetic potential for higher production [i.e. higher growth and milk expected progeny differences (EPDs)], using estrus synchronization and artificial insemination (AI), and following certain specific nutritional supplementation strategies.

Producers who recognize the changing forces around them understand when to evolve and when to hold their ground. These successful cattlemen should be respected and imitated. **AJ**

Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kan.