High Maintenance

Selection for larger and heavier-milking cows may be outpacing the potential return, says OSU animal scientist.

*by **Troy Smith,** field editor*

In recent years, weaned calf prices have reached record levels. But the prices cattle producers pay for many production inputs also have increased dramatically. That's particularly true for grazed forages, which historically have been a least-cost feed resource. Certainly, commercial cow-calf producers must be cost-conscious in order to maintain profitability, let alone improve it.

With production costs so high, it's not surprising to hear so much talk about developing new genetic selection tools for improving feed efficiency. However, Oklahoma State University (OSU) animal scientist David Lalman said he fears past and current selection emphasis for growth is making beef cows more expensive to maintain.

Speaking during the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) 45th Annual Research Symposium and Convention June 12-15, Lalman discussed the trend toward cows of larger mature size and greater milking ability. Such cows have higher nutrient requirements for which the added cost, in many cases, is not offset by increased productivity. Lalman cited data from various cow country regions suggesting trends in both weaning weight and weaning rate, for several years, have been mostly flat.

While the earlier trend toward bigger frame size has been curbed, Lalman said mature cow weight per inch of height continues to increase. He said research indicates that for every 100 pounds (lb.) of increased mature cow weight, her calf weighs an additional 6 lb. at weaning. The value of that added calf weight probably ranges from $5 to $7.

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— *David Lalman*

"Every 100 pounds of additional cow weight costs about $42 in added maintenance cost," stated Lalman. "You need 50 pounds of calf weight to pay for it, and we're a long way from that."

Generally, there has been a push for more muscle and more capacity, but less fat. There is potential for negative impact to fertility, as well as nutrient requirements. Less body fat in proportion to muscle means these cows have to be heavier to obtain the same fat composition, which is still the best mediator we are aware of driving fertility, Lalman said. Bigger cows may have to achieve a higher body condition score to be in optimum condition for reproduction, and producers may have trouble distinguishing what is muscle and what is fat when trying to assess whether cows are in optimal condition for rebreeding.

Regarding selection for milk, Lalman said selection has pushed lactation potential so far that cows of some beef breeds are approaching maintenance levels for the Holstein breed.

"I suggest to you," said Lalman, "that the pendulum has already swung too far, and we are trying to make the environment fit the kind of cows we like."

Lalman said targeting more moderation in growth, mature size and milk, combined with modification of ranch stocking rates would seem a good response to economic trends and likely would result in increased efficiency.

Lalman spoke during the BIF symposium's general session focused on "Using Genetic Tools to Address Environmental Challenges and Cow Herd Efficiency Developments." To access his PowerPoint and/or to listen to his presentation firsthand, visit the newsroom at *www.bifconference.com,* the *Angus Journal's* event coverage site for the annual BIF symposium. Coverage of the event is made possible through collaboration with BIF and sponsorship of *LiveAuctions.tv.*

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