

Get Your Herd in Shape

Make the most of today's high-value investments.

by Barb Baylor Anderson, field editor

The U.S. cow herd has shrunk to its smallest size in more than 60 years. Cattle prices reached new record highs in 2012, and could push even higher in 2013. With such high-value investments, beef specialists are urging cow-calf producers to make sure herds are in tip-top shape for the long run, especially those producers with an eye on expansion.

"Beef producers have a huge responsibility to provide quality products along the supply chain that will help maintain beef demand at these prices, and cow-calf producers are where that begins," says Travis Meteer, University of Illinois Extension beef cattle educator. "Just as important on the production side is for cow-calf producers to make adjustments to management that improve efficiencies in this market. Only consider herd expansion within your means."

Meteer encourages producers — both seedstock and commercial — to look for

Herd Health



ways to extend productivity and profitability within the cow herd. For producers considering herd expansion, he suggests first calculating record-high land prices and input costs for feed and pasture into balance sheets, and looking into management-intensive grazing (MiG) or alternate feed sources if needed.

Eye on efficiency

For producers who have the resources to expand, Meteer says the focus turns to cow efficiency.

"Cow longevity has a big impact on profitability. Females may need to have six to seven calves before they are profitable with high-input and startup costs," he says. "Heterosis is an easy way to inject longevity into commercial herds, up to 20% to 30% more, and all cow-calf producers need good body condition scores for breed-back, sound vaccination and biosecurity protocols."

Justin Sexten, University of Missouri (MU) Extension beef specialist, says efficiency is a priority in today's environment because

it can improve both cost and production management.

"If I can reduce cost and do not change productivity, I have improved my efficiency," he explains. "There are numerous examples of increasing productivity out there without knowing the actual costs, and that can result in reduced profitability."

For example, he says creep-feeding can increase productivity (weaning weight), but may result in reduced profitability due to high cost of gain and low value of gain at certain times of the year.

"Creep-fed heifers can have lower lifetime milk production due to excessive condition around puberty. In addition, excessive supplementation of cows after calving can increase milk production and ultimately weaning weight, but

also may not increase profitability," he says. "Cow supplementation before calving and creep-feeding calves of low-milk-producing cows can be beneficial at times, but increased profitability is not always the case."

To maximize efficiency, Meteer suggests producers fit cows to their environment. For example, he says Midwest producers can generally support high-growth genetics and subsequently larger cows due to more abundant feed resources. Such is not the case in the High Plains and Southwest, however, where feed resources are more limited.

"Producers in those regions may not have the resources to handle the bigger sizes, so cows won't breed readily and will fall out of their environment," he says. "If you end up with an open cow, she is not going to have much longevity in your system."

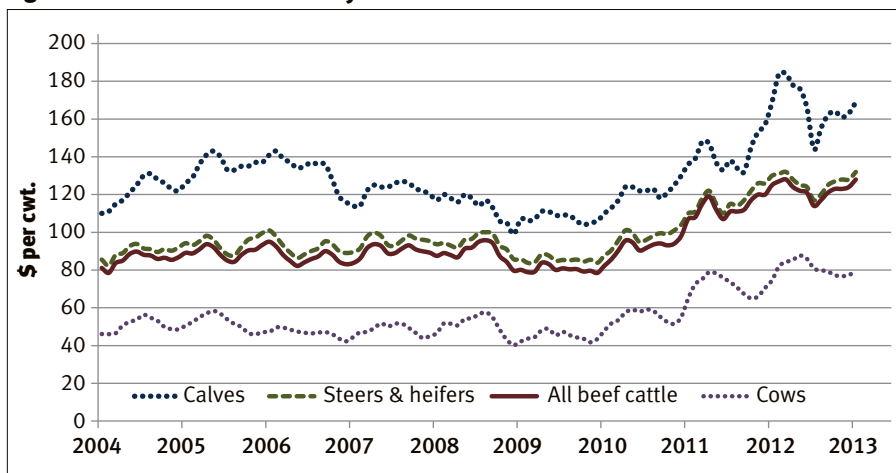
Don't skimp on genetics

Meteer encourages producers to increasingly utilize technology, such as artificial insemination (AI) or estrous



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Fig. 1: Prices received for cattle by month — United States



Source: USDA-NASS, Jan. 31, 2013.

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synchronization, to achieve the best breeding results. In general, he advises producers to choose one or more AI sires to use at the beginning of the breeding season, anticipate the number of cows returning to estrus, and ensure adequate bull power is available to breed them.

“Not only can this incorporate superior, proven genetics, but it can also front-load your calving season,” he says. “If you are investing in your herd for the long haul, don’t be afraid to invest in sound genetics and apply available technology.

“As we move forward, the genetic component of breeding is going to get very interesting with DNA testing,” he continues. “We will have the opportunity to make genetic progress in less time. We will start to identify, develop and market genetic lines that are more specialized for different production schemes and market targets.”

Evaluating heifers for reproductive tract score before breeding can improve operational efficiency by eliminating heifers with minimal chances to breed, says Sexten. He advises producers to market those animals prior to spending any additional resources on them. Preventing and detecting open cows early minimizes the amount of inefficiency due to feed inputs without productive outputs.

“Breeding soundness exams are the best health investment in the near future,” he says. “Turning out a fertile bull is much more efficient than a sterile one, and, depending on herd size, using AI may allow you to reduce bull costs by eliminating the need to purchase an additional sire. Weigh the cost against additional labor and facility requirements, but be sure and credit enhanced genetic performance of calves from superior genetics.”

Manage heifers carefully

Meteer says producers should invest in the best-fit genetic package for a chosen market. If retained ownership is part of the plan, Meteer says producers can afford to spend more to get a bull with a good \$B (dollar beef) value.

“If you are selling feeder calves and retaining replacement females, then you can afford to invest more in a bull with more \$W, (dollar weaning)” he says. “Do not select genetics that are too high growth and milk to support. That really is mandatory for long-term expansion.”

Producers in the market for females to expand a herd should consider time frame for purchase decisions. Sexten says producers may want to sell heifers and purchase middle-aged cows.

“You will have less invested since cows do not need to be developed weaning to maturity, or in the case of bred heifers, calving to maturity. In many cases, less initial dollars invested means reduced calving difficulty potential. Heifers offer the best genetics available, but fallout from weaning to a 5-year-old is typically greater than mature cows. As cropland expands and producers trim herds due to lost pasture or drought, quality mature cows will be available,” he says.

Heifers aren’t cheap, either. A \$2,200 price set an all-time state-record average price on 135 bred heifers at a Show-Me-Select Replacement Sale last December in Missouri. The top lot, a registered Angus heifer, brought \$2,950. Four heifers averaged \$2,600, another record.

“Those heifers had good EPDs for carcass grade and \$B genetics,” says Roger Eakins, MU Extension regional livestock specialist. “Many heifers were from herds in the program with six or seven generations of stacked pedigrees. ... These heifers meet all of the requirements to add value to buyers’ herds. Our repeat buyers know to look for heifers that were bred in first service by timed AI. ... Buyers pay for quality.”

Meteer adds, “Cow-calf producers are in the driver’s seat, so don’t buy problems at the sale barn. Purchase cattle that come with a good history. It’s ok to pay a premium for proven genetics.”

The decision about whether to manage heifers or mature cows also depends on operation strengths. Sexten says producers with feed and labor resources to manage heifers from weaning should consider developing heifers. Those with marginal feed resources for existing cows and limited labor to manage developing heifers at breeding should consider purchasing bred heifers as known quantities without the losses associated with reproduction, disposition and health.

Get a handle on health

Regardless of the makeup of the herd, producers also should maximize value by establishing a sound, preventative health management program.

“Health management is an insurance policy,” says Meteer. “Even if you think you have a closed system, the wildlife population, for example, may spread disease to your herd. Or, if you introduce new animals to your herd, there also are possible health implications. We have seen cattle move

around the country lately and take problems such as different pinkeye stains and trich (trichomoniasis) with them.”

Larry Hawkins, senior technical services veterinarian for Bayer Animal Health, says producers also should focus on proper health management to strengthen heifer development.

“Heifers need to reach target weights of 60% to 65% of body weight by the time they are bred and 80% to 85% of mature weight when they have the calf,” he says. “Cows that do not have a proper body condition score will not have enough colostrum, and colostrum is key for calf health. Once you have a calf nursing, you should already start thinking about rebreeding.”



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John Rodgers, Zoetis cattle and equine technical services veterinarian, agrees reproduction is the No. 1 health-management issue for cow-calf producers.

“Be sure you can optimize pregnancy rates and weaning percentage. Work with your veterinarian to protect the fetus, and have a plan in place to keep heifers healthy,” he says.

Maintaining health beyond calving should include a vaccination program so cows are vaccinated at the appropriate time.

“It is easier to booster the cow when you have a long-term commitment to timely and appropriate vaccinations,” says Hawkins. “Some new vaccines are in development for scours and respiratory ailments, so producers should work with their vet to make sure they know what is available. Vaccines are an effective way to achieve good immunity.”

Calf vaccinations at weaning can provide good immunity for females going into heifer development programs. Rodgers says while it is always important to invest in health, current economics provide an opportunity to be more aggressive with protocols and products, including parasite control that helps keep females ready to breed and in good condition.

“Preventative medicine can minimize reproductive loss, calf death loss and reduced productivity due to disease or parasitism,” adds Sexten. “Prewaning vaccinations and processing, combined with a backgrounding or value-added marketing program, allow producers to capture added expense by reducing health losses or receiving higher prices for calves, as well.”

