

Size

By Jim Gerrish

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Does Matter

It seems the pendulum is finally swinging back. After years of trying to make cattle bigger and bigger, the beef industry has finally realized that big is not necessarily better. So why does size matter when it comes to the size of cows? The simplest way to put it is bigger animals eat more feed and as sires and dams become larger and larger, it is increasingly difficult for the parents to wean calves that are a high percentage of their own weight. As parental weight increases, the amount of feed required to produce each pound of progeny goes up. Where as it used to be just crackpots like Kit Pharo and Chip Hines who touted the virtues of smaller cattle, now more and more university researchers are echoing the same tune. Recently Eric Mousel from South Dakota State University and Kris Ringwall from North Dakota State have both reported studies showing how inefficient larger cows are in producing calves weighing anything more than 40% of their own bodyweight. The largest cows in these two studies weaned calves weighing only about 1/3rd of their own bodyweight. The South Dakota work not only looked at the weaning weight ratios, but looked at the net return to a fixed land resource for cows of various sizes. Contrary to the gospel of the mainstream cattle industry, the most profitable cows were those in the 1000-1100 lb range and those in the 1400- 1500+ lb range were the least profitable. So how did the status quo cattle industry get it so wrong?

Simply by forgetting that bigger animals eat more feed. By the way, retired Colorado rancher Chip Hines has written a book titled 'How Did We Get It So Wrong' chronicling how the cattle industry went down the 'bigger is better' path without considering the cost of their actions. In modeling work based on 15 years of cattle data from the University of Missouri-Forage Systems Research Center, Dr. Ron Morrow and his graduate student came to the same conclusion way back in the mid-1990s. The conclusion of that work was once cows get over 1200 lbs, the inefficiency of larger cows became increasingly apparent. The idea that just using a bull with a higher weaning or yearling weight EPD would give you more pounds for free is patently false. Every increase in production, whether as milk yield or weight gain, comes at a cost. Please never forget there are two components to the profit equation: Cost and Income. Higher income means nothing if costs to produce the animal are increased disproportionately higher. At a recent visit to the USDA-Meat Animal Research Center at Clay Center, Nebraska, I learned even the ARS (Agricultural Research Service) is striving to downsize the average cow weight in some of their herds. In certain genetic evaluations, the size of cows is the consequence of particular germ plasm evaluations and there is no opportunity to alter cow size, but reduced cow size is the order of the day for the rest of their herds. They have simply realized, like so many commercial ranchers, that they cannot afford to feed cows beyond the 1200 lb range.

While you may read many articles in the mainstream beef industry press touting the advantages of producing the same amount of beef from fewer and fewer larger cows, the bottom line down on the ranch does not support this line of thinking. At many of Kit Pharo's Herd Quitter meetings, he illustrates how more smaller cows on any given ranch size will generate more pounds of beef per acre compared to fewer larger cows. Now several research studies have been published that support that position. So the next time you go to a bull sale, remember size does matter – but maybe not in the way you were thinking.