

# ON TARGET



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## *Ranch environment and beef demand*

You've heard about it often enough: Match the cow to your environment. The articles and presentations say optimize the use of land, labor and forage resources; monitor success by measuring pounds of beef per acre.

That sounds simple enough, but individuals vary their interpretations. Those who love to put more labor into it may select for twinning and double their output. Of course, that's far-fetched and rejected by any who have experienced the tradeoffs of trying to get twins born unassisted to a dam that will rouse them both to nurse and then raise them both to weaning. You certainly get rapid feedback as to success or failure, and that serves as part of your environment: the challenge of raising twins is greater than the increased production per acre.

If twinning won't work for your resources, you might shift gears and consider a feedyard to diversify risk while maximizing those pounds of beef per acre. Many cattle farms and ranches across the country incorporate a weaning pen and backgrounding enterprise, but few retain ownership beyond a few weeks – that would not enhance their labor, land and management. Again, we have direct feedback as to suitability of an alternative, but in this case management makes the cow less relevant.

Few articles reference the consumer's impact on ranch environment. Just the thought of some city hipster dictating your environment can stop the reading if not make the blood boil. But keep calm and read on: consumers exert an indirect influence on your ranch environment, but they still represent the only new money in the beef production system. Without their influence, all the other segments in the chain are just trading the same dollars among themselves. The consumer will choose beef, pork, poultry or fish, each time providing the first new dollars into that protein's supply chain. Those dollars then flow through the supply chain to signal more or less demand.

Consumers are easy to ignore out on the ranch. You don't see them in the cross-fencing for better grass utilization or any of a dozen choices you make every day while fitting the cow to your environment. You don't see them in breeding and management decisions because, unlike twinning or the backgrounding yard, feedback is muted and maybe a year and many miles down the road. Still, the consumers' growing demand for higher beef quality is a growing component of your ranch environment, presenting an opportunity to optimize your resources and management.

Leading seedstock suppliers know that. It's their role to study those demand signals and plan ahead to help you meet not today's demand but what the market will want a few years in the future when their bulls' progeny are finished and ready for harvest. Look around and you'll find a good number of genetic suppliers to help you target the consumer demand for high-quality beef while maintaining a focus on breeding cows with moderate milk or reduced mature size.

Yes, carcass quality can be achieved without sacrificing ranch adaptability – oh wait, a cow suited to quality is already helping you adapt your ranch, as are management plans that help realize her calf's genetic potential to marble.

Matching the cow to restaurant and meat-case environments has been demonstrated at ranches, farms and feedyards across the country. There are brand partners in the desert Southwest, the hot and sticky Southeast, the feed-rich Midwest and arid mountain West. Science has not evaluated every market and environmental combination, but farmers, feeders and ranchers evaluate the influence consumer protein choice has on their operation every day. Choice and Prime cattle have exceeded 80% of the fed supply this spring, bringing no signal from the demand environment to suggest we need more below-average beef.

New consumer dollars are scarce for lower quality beef, because the most price-conscious consumers who simply want cheap protein have more economical options in poultry and pork. Matching the cow herd to the environment is difficult, but today's successful managers optimize land and labor inputs by satisfying the demand for high-quality beef.

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