



Can't get no (Satisfaction)

Do you know enough about your cows to judge whether they're performing at peak efficiency?

I've seen cow herds that were billed as "nothing special," and been introduced to cows by owners who admitted, "I'm not proud of them." This kind of humility is fairly common across the country.

Sometimes you can see why bragging is not considered an option, but sometimes the modesty seems to be its own boast. Looking at cows that could top any stock show, you may wonder what it takes to satisfy the owner.

First, keep in mind that some homely cows raise calves that perform at the level required to win a Best of the Breed contest. Others may be awful pretty, and awful poor producers. You may be looking at the bottom 10% indexing cows in a herd backed by records and screened to include only cows with near ideal visual type.

It's OK to be proud of your cows, if they've responded well to every challenge the environment has thrown at them. If you're 100% satisfied with them, however, that's not so good. Complacency leads to backsliding until you must be satisfied with a lower level of production.

The difference between blissful satisfaction and "never satisfied" may lie in how much you know about the cows. When sorting steers as feeders or heifers as

replacements, it pays to look at records to back up visual selection. When palpation indicates some young cows are due to calve two weeks past your ideal cutoff, records will tell you if those cows have steadily increased their calving intervals and help you judge whether they deserve one last chance.

When the 2001 cowherd and other enterprise records are complete, dare to compare the numbers with 2000 and years prior. Chart the trend lines—are they headed in the right direction? More important than where your numbers lie on a chart, do you know why they fall where they do? An apparent drop in productivity may be explained by a change in calving seasons or by an influx of heifers that promise to make it up in the future—or you could be sliding toward lower profitability.

Look at costs versus production and income. Of course you'd like to cut costs, but it takes excellent records to know where or even if that is possible without a loss in net income. The market is changing, and "least-cost production" is no longer an adequate goal. It must be combined with beef quality goals, such as 70% Choice grade or better and 70% Yield Grade 2 or better, produced at least cost. Use breed association databases to select genetics that advance both live animal and carcass performance.

"Benchmarking" is a useful tool for beef improvement. University Extension, breed association and information management companies offer benchmarking services on a per-head cost cheaper than a trip through the chute.

For starters, it extracts information from ranch, feedlot and packinghouse data to establish the performance level for your herd on several variables from pounds weaned per cow exposed, to feed efficiency to carcass value. Then, benchmarking puts your

information in context, showing how it compares to that of average, high and low producers in the service's database.

What good does that do? You're in a competitive business, when you consider the big picture. If your cattle rank in the bottom in some area, you need to know why, and if you can do better. You may find that a poor showing in some area can't be helped but is counterbalanced by excellence in another area. The rate of business failure is relatively higher from producers in the bottom percentiles for profit.

You should also track your benchmark figures from year to year. In combination with those comparisons to other farms and ranches, you learn what's possible and what works.

Benchmarking can create some producer disappointment and dissatisfaction at first, but that should soon be counterbalanced by the ability to take effective action. Will you ever be satisfied? For the good of the industry, I hope not.

Next time, we'll take a look at the importance of communication in beef production. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

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