



## *Making cows count*

By Steve Suther

Cows can't do math, but their owners should at least do some counting. From financial balance sheets to stocking rates, a precise inventory is a must.

Beyond that, you need cows that are worth owning. Cows that matter, that count because of what they can profitably produce. That's true regardless of herd size, and it's true for the U.S. beef industry.

If you have five cows, you might think this is a simple exercise. It probably is, if there are also five calves with them half of the year. If you have an idle cow, revisit your reasons for owning her.

Nobody can afford to throw money away, and raising four out of five calves is a way of doing that. Of course, it could be worse; there are small herds with 60% or 40% crops, mainly because the owners have not yet figured out how to keep all cows bred or nursing a calf.

Cow people, whether they own five or 100, can be charmed by a cow or cow family and overlook some faults. The most common and sometimes forgivable one is losing a first calf. Just keep in mind that she's on parole and sell her if "bad luck" recurs.

Relationships can benefit your bottom line. The rancher with 160 pairs and grass for 150 may wish he knew some neighbors with smaller herds that are carrying 10 freeloader cows. Conversely, those neighbors need to find a way to gain efficiency.

Post a note on the co-op bulletin board or pass the word at the morning coffee chat if you want to cooperate on cows. It doesn't take away from your program to run five of the neighbor's cows alongside. He may even help by providing a bull as part of the arrangement. That can lead to joint marketing opportunities down the road.

The small producer should also find a regular source of replacement bred females, rather than buying some random ornery cow at the sale. When buying at auction, research the cows in advance.

If you're going to start from scratch and build a herd, buy cows that are sought after because of the calves they produce. That brings up breeding, by bull or artificial insemination, depending on your access to the expertise. Engage your creativity and build relationships with a plan on how to manage

and market the calves. As a rule, the more cooperation, the easier on your bottom line. It doesn't hurt to have a team of neighbors evaluating your herd, either.

If you aren't sure how many cows your farm or ranch can handle, ask more experienced friends to ride around with you some afternoon. Small producers find out quickly that not all cows are the same, so it is not entirely appropriate to talk about how many cows you need until you decide on the type and size.

Do you want 10 cows that weigh 1,500 pounds or 15 that weigh 1,000? That becomes a more critical question as your available land and herd inventory grows to many times that number. Will it be 100 cows or 150? You might want to figure in total pounds of weaned calf; 1,000-lb. cows may produce 500-lb. calves, but larger cows don't maintain that 50% ratio.

The U.S. cow inventory, at 32 million head, is at a 50-year low and down from 39 million head in 1982. Yet, the total supply of beef has been nearly steady due to increasing carcass weights, which are closely correlated to the increasing cow weights. Most of today's cows are managed more efficiently as well.

In a sense, we don't need as many cows. But in another sense, that depends on consumer demand for beef, including exports. Your future looks better if we need more cows. If they are the right cows, and their calves are managed to make high-quality beef, demand will form a base at this level.

Analysts who have projected total cow inventory based on reported fed-cattle harvest, dairy and replacement breeding stock have suggested the current 32-million-head figure is overstated by a million or more. If that's true, it could take a few years for reality to mesh with the reports.

But regardless of when the national inventory shows a gain, you can help make a future that allows your cow inventory to grow. Just focus on the ultimate customer and make each cow count in that campaign.

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