



Saving a buck

By Miranda Reiman

These are penny-pinching times. Thermostats and consumer spending are down. People are traveling less and doing without frills.

Cattlemen often embrace this conservative spirit, even in the good years. We know that the cattle cycle turns, and favorable prices can only last so long.

Maybe you hear the echo from dad or grandpa: “Waste not, want not.” Living through the Great Depression, they taught you to see the second or third life in all supplies.

Used feed sacks can be used again or double as garbage bags. You take worn-out tires home to “recycle” on a wagon or to hold down your silage tarp. You look at that leaning barn that others said needs a match. You’ll save the tin and two-by-sixes first, for projects down the road.

When times get tough, it can be hard for the already thrifty to cut expenses, especially if you’ve managed to keep a focus on producing quality.

As you look at operating costs and search for cuts, you notice the vaccination program. Then there’s the creep feed, the regular facilities upgrades and those source- and age-verification tags you’ve been using.

It’s healthy to question everything, but before you go after the nickels and dimes that help you produce high-quality calves, take another look at the dollars in cow feed costs.

Even if you own the land and there’s a stockpile of good grass, cows don’t eat free. They do eat more the longer they’re nursing; that gets costly when you need to supplement pairs. You might consider early weaning this year to keep some cash in your pocket, while increasing profit from those calves.

“What? Take calves off the free milk and feed them a ration? That’s going to save money?”

Dollar-pinching times call for open minds. Put a pencil to your winter feed costs, the supplement in less productive seasons, even pasture rent. How much could you save if those cows had one or two more points of body condition on them going into the months of poorer forage?

Any grass resource will last longer if the cows graze it solo late in the season. You only have so many animal unit months; decide if you want to run fewer pairs for a shorter season or wean the calves and save more for the cows.

The benefit may come later as pastures thrive with less pressure. That will really help in times of drought or other emergencies. In even less time, your cows and calves could gain from some calendar tweaks.

With more time and calories to prepare themselves for the next breeding season, conception rates could rise. Research suggests every two weeks beyond an ideal weaning date, cows lose a tenth of a body-condition score. Conversely, they build up condition after earlier weaning. A month or two can make a big change for those cows.

Many who have tried early weaning, perhaps due to drought, know the advantages for calves. Besides improved health, an early-weaned calf is extremely efficient. Studies show conversions as high as 3 pounds (lb.) of feed per lb. of gain, with relatively efficient gain all the way through finishing for a lifelong feed savings. Plus, their end quality grade gets a boost from the longer time on a high-starch diet. That's all part of adding value to every link of the chain.

The alternatives of supplementing pairs late in the season or letting calves get by on "free milk" could mean net feed conversions of about half the potential efficiency, or calves with stunted genetic potential that will never hit a high-quality target. Not to mention the benefits to your range.

Marketing options sweeten the deal. Early-weaned calves can sell when demand is hotter, and the same could hold true for earlier-identified cull cows.

Early or late, it's all about the calendar. That's at least as true for calving as it is for weaning, for both govern feed costs.

Forget your current calving season for the moment and think about when it should be. In the north, sliding from February-March to April-May could let your pairs graze spring growth and flush for breeding. That saves on feed and trips with the hay truck. Then, weaning at the traditional time would turn into early weaning.

Remember to look at everything related to feed costs, too. Volatile markets call for a frequent check of alternative ingredients and methods of delivery, for example. Try the math on anything and everything. Maybe later generations will benefit and remember your solutions, as practical as mended jeans and resoled boots.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Steve Suther will consider calving issues. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail mreiman@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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