Profit per acre, not production per cow

Of Bovine Ilk
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One of the most important stories I’ve written about the beef industry is on Page BP10 of this issue. I say this because the logic behind the story leads us back toward the right kind of animal — the kind of animal needed to increase our real profitability. True profit in the beef industry, particularly in the grazing segments, springs from the amount of beef produced per acre and the amount of net profit garnered per acre.

In that vein, you may remember I’ve written a great deal about these two things:

■ how grazing management can increase stocking rate and therefore increase profitability
■ how stocking rate per acre is the most important profitability factor

Now we’re adding that final piece of the puzzle. We’re showing you how important it is to have the right kind of animal in the right grazing system in order to maximize profitability.

These themes I have also continued in this issue beyond the article I mentioned in the opening paragraph.

But I’d like to get back to my latest experiences with Johann Zietsman for a moment. He is a rare individual. I keep hearing him expound on things I already knew to be true, but that have been ignored or overlooked by the mainstream. He also teaches new concepts I’ve not heard defined before. Again, they’re recognizable as truth when one hears them.

Here’s another gem I’ve actually been pushing before readers and friends for a long time, but this quote is from Zietsman’s new book:

“Energy is what drives the world. Cattle require energy to perform. Fat is energy. All cattle that have evolved under conditions of poor nutrition are early-maturing and capable of fattening at an early age and lower weight. Cattle that have evolved in seasonal rainfall areas with an extended dry season and periodic prolonged drought are not only early-maturing, but also able to fatten quickly with the ability to store additional fat. This stored fat is essential for production and survival during periods of paucity.”

Here are other bits of wisdom I gleaned from Zietsman at workshops this summer.

When hormonal signals in early-maturing animals bring on sexual maturity, they also stop the growth of long bones. In fact, the two traits are genetically opposed. Therefore, early-maturing animals will have shorter legs as adults than late-maturing animals. But their bodies can keep growing, and they often have a very long appearance.

That helps explain why, as beef breeders pushed frame scores up dramatically in the 1980s, infertility became a problem and scrotal circumference scoring became vogue. Zietsman says, “It’s like taking a poison and then looking for the antidote.”

He also says it’s been his experience in breeding cattle, as well as looking at cattle across the world, that smaller frame-size animals, combined with the highly efficient 8-in-5 package he likes to see in cattle, will have tighter sheaths and smaller, better udders. Further, he says the tight udders and tight sheaths seem genetically linked.

Zietsman also tells people not to worry about inbreeding, as long as they are keeping the right kind of pressure on productivity and adaptation.

“In your herds, all your best animals are related, right?” he asks. When people agree, he continues, “So you can’t get away from inbreeding. It is a natural occurrence in nature. So let’s just make sure we’re selecting animals that are sound.”

This type of knowledge, this wisdom, needs to be blended into our current simple view of science as the provider of all silver bullets. It is acumen we are missing in the beef industry.

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