



Champion of Efficiency

How many times did you either talk about or at least think about the high cost of fuel this week? Coffee shop talk has reverted from the discussion of calf and cull cow prices to, “What did you pay for diesel or gasoline?” or “Man, that fertilizer bill really kicked me in the pants.”

We have all been hit by the escalating cost of fuel, but none have been hit harder than American farmers and ranchers. While commodity prices for corn and beans remain flat to lower in recent years, feed costs continue to climb for ranchers hit with drought, while fuel and fertilizer have virtually doubled since two years ago.

U.S. Senator Durbin from Illinois recently said that in 2005, Illinois farmers paid \$314 million more for fuel, fertilizer and pesticide than in 2004.

Sources with the *Detroit Free Press* reported that in 2005, the nation’s farmers spent \$24 billion on their primary energy costs, including fertilizer, fuels and oils. That represented 12.2% of the \$197 billion in total production expenses tallied last year. By comparison, farmers spent \$17 billion on those same costs, which were 9.6% of the \$178 billion total in 2003.

Undoubtedly the squeeze is upon us all; fuel prices are not likely to retreat to below \$2.50 a gallon, and the combination of erratic precipitation

trends along with higher input costs means just one thing for the cattle industry — we’re going to have to learn to become more efficient.

The average producer might say that it’s going to be hard to squeeze blood out of a turnip, but we may not be squeezing the turnip hard enough yet. As an industry, there still seems to be a lot of waste in our production systems. Some breeds are infatuated with marbling. Feedlots still get cattle too fat. As seedstock producers, we tend to get our yearling bulls overly fat to make them weigh more and look more appealing at market time.

We spend a lot of time putting up hay instead of evaluating systems to reduce feed inputs. We still look at enterprise success by evaluating weaning weights and market price instead of total pounds weaned per acre and overall profit. With economic pressure, our mindset is likely to change and so will our perception of valuable traits in selection decisions.

Efficiency may have to come in several areas such as cutting back on unnecessary inputs, stressing animals to their biological potential, and relying on genetics that can survive and reproduce with fewer inputs. How on earth are we going to get it done? One thing is for sure, those traits in cattle that we thought to be sexy, such

as maximizing pounds of weaned calf, increasing the marbling of our product, etc., may just get a little less important in the big scheme of things.

How about reducing feed utilization, identifying cows that can rough it and still get bred, spending less time worrying about calf weights and more time worrying about live calves born and weaned, developing cows that will last longer and reduce replacement cost, and last but not least, less concern on single-trait selection for carcass traits or those mysterious DNA marbling markers?

Hereford strengths

For the last three decades the Hereford breed has gotten a bum wrap. Sure there were functional things the breed needed to work on, and we’re all aware of those stereotypes, deserved or not. However, there has always been something locked into the genetic fabric of Hereford cattle that, despite all of the selection pressures over the years, both helpful and harmful, has never been bred out.

The fact remains: the Hereford breed is the hardiest, toughest and most efficient bovine beast to walk the cold northwestern scab rock, high desert plains, western sage, dry bluestem and hot fescue climates.

Something biologically is fixed in Hereford cattle that allows them to survive on less and conceive with

fewer resources than other breeds. No, Herefords are not the heaviest at weaning when compared to Continental cattle. Although very much adequate in terms of beef quality, they do not grade as high a percentage of Choice as Angus. Despite these facts, they are the “champion of efficiency.” Considering the state of our economic environment, efficiency is where we need to hang our star.

In the coming months and years ahead, the American Hereford Association (AHA) will be working in various parts of the country to document the incredible efficiency that Hereford cattle possess. Several research projects have been started to evaluate the economic benefit of Herefords in a crossbreeding system. The breed’s heterosis effect, the value of cow productivity in a Hereford crossbreeding system and the inherent feed efficiency that has been elusive to prove in past decades will be critically evaluated.

Those who have been utilizing Hereford cattle understand the efficiency and toughness built into the breed. At some point, the rest of the industry will recognize the Hereford breed as the “leader” and “champion” of efficiency. Now, considering I’m going to invest about \$75 on a tank of gas on my way home, I think that sounds pretty exciting. **HW**