

Should I Market 25.6 or 51.2 Tons of Beef?

Two bottom-line numbers illustrate the positive outcome of a choice.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center's steer calves born in May 2015 weighed 25.6 tons late in the fall of 2015. The center overwintered the steers, put them on summer grass and transferred 51.2 tons of beef to the feedlot late in the fall of 2016.

Which one would you choose?

Even more remarkable: The center did not need the cows to produce the second 25.6 tons. The cows, once again, were setting the stage for the first 25.6 tons.

At the onset, marketing double the pounds of beef by holding the weaned calves over for summer grazing has to make one ponder. Of course, expenses, markets and all operational changes need careful pondering as well. But the fact still remains: Opportunities are available for beef producers who take the path of change.

A new path

That path involves an extended discussion associated with the implementation of an aggressive integrated crop and livestock system. The system has the potential to improve soil health, add more diversity per acre, establish crop rotations (including cover crops for more pounds of forage per acre), and produce more biomass, grain, grass and hay. The system also can add more pounds of beef per acre and extend conventional beef marketing from calves to yearlings.

The extra pounds for a beef operation are critical. In the overall picture in May 2015, the center had 7,460 lb. of steer calves on the ground, or just a little more than 3.7 tons of beef, from 84 steer calves that averaged 88.8 lb. at birth. However, the center's mission is not to produce veal.

The calves were summered and fall grazed with their mothers, and their weaning weight totaled 51,216 lb. (just more than 25.6 tons of beef). The 84 steers calves averaged 610 lb. at weaning, but the center no longer sells weaned calves. Instead, it maintains the calves for a summer yearling forage program.

The second year came to a close when the steers were gathered, processed and shipped to the feed yard. The center shipped 102,484 lb. of steers (just more than 51.2 tons of beef), or 82 steers that averaged 1,250 lb., on Dec. 19.

After an uneventful trip, the next day, the steers weighed 97,690 lb., with an average weight of 1,191 lb., and had an average shrink of 4.7%.

The steers are being fed at the James C. Hageman Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension Center (Department of Animal Science, University of Wyoming) at Lingle, Wyo. As of Feb. 20, 117,550 lb. of steers (just less than 58.8 tons of beef), or 81 steers with an average steer weight of 1,451 lb., still were eating feed. (One steer was sold as a live steer at 1,252 lb., having arrived at 1,325 lb. and never adjusting to the feedlot.)

The 69-day gain was 2.9 lb. per day, or 201 lb. The feedlot reports would indicate the steers need another 30 to 45 days before harvest. That will put the pen at 128,121 lb., an average of 1,582 lb. (just less than 64.1 tons of beef).

That is a lot of beef going from 3.7 tons of beef; it's adding almost 60.4 tons in about 22 months.

What if?

So, "what if?" What if agricultural producers implemented crop rotation systems to improve soil health, lower input costs, and significantly diversify and integrate crop and livestock systems? The "what if" is very real. Producers

cannot jump into alternative approaches to agriculture simply, but producers can open the door for change.

Back to the original pondering points: Expenses, markets and all operational changes need to be addressed. Starting slow is good.

The center is no different. The concept started in the mid-'90s, when dollars were tight and income low. More recently, the integration of cover crops into cropping rotations has taken root.

The natural follow-up is grazing. Visiting scholar Songul Senturklu and animal scientist Douglas Landblom are exploring the concept further. They're enhancing soil productivity by using a multicrop rotation and integrating beef cattle for grazing.

Exploring opportunities

This final integration of beef cattle really completes the change. As one's mind goes back through time, the pieces of the puzzle slowly move around and come together. Looking back, three big pieces are evident:

First, as the equipment inventory was lowered, the cows have done more of the harvesting.

Second, as the center switched from March-April calving to May-June calving, labor issues went away and expenses decreased.

Third, the increase in cropping diversity allowed for more grazing options.

Still, all the answers are not known because each individual producer has to examine the financial opportunities balanced with risk. But the opportunity to explore remains, and so does the potential to improve soil health, add diversity per acre, add pounds of forage per acre, add pounds of beef per acre and, we hope, add more dollars per acre. Pondering is good. **HW**