

Keeping More Heifers Turned Out Well

by **Kris Ringwall** | Keeping more heifers during a drought can help preserve a herd's genetics and increase management flexibility.

How is it possible to cut cow numbers in half and maintain the same number of cows calving? That seems like a strange question, but the question surfaced as the Dickinson Research Extension Center (DREC) prepped for the current drought on this year's feed supply. The answer is to develop all the heifers as future brood cows.

The answer may seem as strange as the question, but keep in mind one of the center's focus is to maintain calves longer in their life cycle, utilizing lower inputs and more forage. The bottom line: more pounds of beef.

The study

Fortunately, the center has 86 pregnant heifers from last year's calf crop, so the current bred female inventory is 229.

This is not a traditional approach, but one factor stood out: The younger cows are lighter and require less feed, and bred heifers have more flexibility to seek outside locations to feed.

The bred heifers were transferred from the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Beef Cattle Research Complex in Fargo, N.D., where they were

developed and bred, to the Central Grasslands Research Extension Center near Streeter, N.D., for winter feeding. The DREC took advantage of the feed resources in eastern North Dakota and saved hay-shipping costs.

Interestingly, cow numbers can vary tremendously within a given time period for a given cattle operation. Depending on inventory makeup, the reduction in cow numbers will have varying impacts on the cow age distribution.

In the center's favor was the large inventory of younger, lighter cows. That was a good thing this year. Heifer retention at the center means keeping all the heifers. The requirements: The heifer had to be alive with no obvious health issues, no heifers born twin to a bull, no obvious structural issues and at least 500 lb. at 1 year of age.

During the past three years following a low-input winter backgrounding period, no heifers had health, structural or weight issues, and only an occasional freemartin was put with the steer calves. Essentially, if a heifer was weaned, she was sent to the NDSU Heifer Development Center in Fargo.

The DREC has sent 303 heifers to the NDSU Heifer Development Center in the past three years. Heifers not adjusting to a confined feeding system were sold as yearlings because the lack of adjustment capacity was assumed to be an indication of adaptation issues. The remaining heifers were developed and bred with the expectation they would return to the DREC.

To date, 229 developed females, or just less than 76%, are pregnant. Of the initial set of 100 heifers born in 2014, 77 coming 4-year-old cows, or 77%, remain. Of the second set of 93 heifers born in 2015, 66 coming 3-year-old cows, or 71%, remain. Of this year's 110 heifers born in 2016, 86 coming 2-year-old heifers, or 78%, remain.

The point today is simple: If a producer keeps all the heifers and exposes them to a bull, approximately 20% may not become established as a mature cow in the breeding herd. In this particular study, a cow needs to be open two consecutive years to be culled.

Hidden opportunity

Producers may have a hidden opportunity to consider keeping more heifers and exposing them to a bull. During droughts, preserving a herd's genetics can be accomplished by keeping more heifers, which also increases flexibility within managerial options.

Essentially, finding a location to park bred heifers for the winter months is easier than trying to purchase and transport hay. In preparation for future droughts, producers should start thinking of how to aggressively maintain more heifers and let Mother Nature select out the less adapted heifers.

The bottom line is to explore more options on keeping a higher percentage of the annual calf crop as yearlings and taking advantage of the yearlings' ability to grow. Heifers may be a good option, and keeping a younger cow herd allows a producer to manage the mature weight of the cow herd. **HW**

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