Profitable Cows: A Job Description

By John Paterson, Executive Director of Producer Education

I thoroughly enjoy the privilege of writing this column. It allows me to learn about topics affecting beef cattle efficiency by gathering various experts’ opinions. One question that I continually ask, is, “What do we expect of a cow in the future and what characteristics will she possess?” The following are the opinions from several leading cattle experts.

Tom Field - University of Nebraska. The future will be exciting - volatility will remain part of the game and success will be in part dependent on the ability to transform data into information driven strategies. Spending serious effort on transforming data into information driven strategies. Spending serious effort on asking ‘what is possible on this ranch’ will yield value as will taking the time to study and learn from other industries. Entrepreneurs and thought leaders outside of the agricultural realm. Clear awareness of the consequences of choices we make will yield value as will taking the time to understand the tradeoffs of various decisions.

Patsy Houghton - Heartland Cattle Company, Nebraska. It is our job to build “user-friendly” cows. Evaluate and correct form, function and fertility issues at the heifer level. Be sure you are placing good disposition, easy fleshing females into your cowherd that will reproduce year-after-year on a forage-based diet. This will help ensure cow-calf producers have hybrid vigor at some level. Cows continue to get larger, our feed supplies more expensive and we are still looking at per cow output rather than output per acre. This is really about spreading your cost over more inventory.

I am advocating for spending “no money.” I just think we need to be very strategic. Health is a good place to invest — if you are having challenges to solve, production can also be an interesting place to invest — but can put you out of business if you feed them everything they want. Dr. Brinks (Colorado State and a mentor, who said that a cow gets fatter per year, she can get it as well — and it is actually better for her longevity. I don’t mind seeing that swing and it mimics the natural forage cycle and what we see in nature. I would be embarrassed for some people to see our thin cows coming out of the mountains with baby calves. But they breed back. That is the key. Here is my own job description for a successful cow:

- Remember “It is not the ranch’s job to produce what the cow needs to perform on; it is the cow’s job to perform on what the ranch produces.” (thanks, Doc Hatfield)
- Calve unassisted at 2 years of age with minimal supplemental feed
- Calve annually on a primarily natural forage diet with minimal and strategic supplementation.
- Have the ability to breed WITHOUT being a body condition score of 5+. We are feeding fertility into cows and bulls. Big mistake. I am always impressed when a see a 4 or 3 come into heat and get bred. That’s what I want long term.
- Be free of major problems and or issues that create extra labor (feet and legs, udders, eyes, disposition, horns)
- Wean a reasonable calf in terms of weight, with the potential to grow and perform, and produce an excellent end product
- Strive for longevity (almost impossible to assess until it’s over!). This is where the Bas indicus cross cattle do have advantage (offset by some others)
- Produce a calf that does not receive discounts (could be color and/or type), and has the potential to achieve premiums — source verified, natural, CHB or CAB, etc.

Agree with these opinions? If you have additional comments, please give me a message at jpaterson@beef.org.

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