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THREE DIMENSIONAL BEEF COW HERD

It may be self-evident, but the most important aspect of operating for the cow-calf producer is the cow. “It all starts with the cow,” Tom Brink, who is founder and owner of Brink Consulting and Trading in Brighton, Colo., told around 180 farmers and ranchers attending the State of Beef Conference in North Platte recently. “You need to have a functional cow.” That is the first dimension of a successful cowherd. The cows should fit the resources the producer has available. The cows should fit a cross breeding program to produce healthy and very productive calves. The cows should have the calm temperament desirable for farm producers.

Steve Tonn, University of Nebraska Extension Educator focusing of beef said Wednesday night in Beatrice that cow-calf producers should aspire for more. “A two-dimensional cowherd has functional cows that are adapted females with good reproduction rates, reasonable feed costs, longevity and that produce calves that have marketability for feeders,” he explained. “You want those calves to perform above average in the feedyard, and you will enjoy better demand for your calves and better sales prices.” More than ever, there is a link-up between cow-calf producers, feedlots and packers. The first goal is to put the plan together with the right kind of genetics and a care and management plan that is both efficient and adapted to the feedlot/packer programs. For small herd producers those goals are only part of the desirable outcome. The marketing plan may demand groups larger than a single producer can supply. Enlarging the herd, collaboration with other small producers or altering the operation to fit a need in the industry you can be profitable at may be options.

A three-dimensional cowherd is even more profitable. To build a three-dimensional herd, you want to have the ability to create value that includes calves that produce superior carcasses. Seventy-percent of fed cattle produced today are sold based on a carcass-merit payment system. “That’s why carcass value makes this list,” Tonn said. Following these dimensions will allow you to maximize profit potential in all market conditions. Everybody in the system wins, because you are producing value at the farm level and adding value at the feeder and packer level, too. He told producers that they need to prepare their calves as best they can to go into a challenging environment. Feeders and packers value traits like calves that are extremely healthy and can withstand less-than-desirable weather conditions that always come along, he noted. Calves need to grow fast and put on weight efficiently, and they need to grade. Cow-calf producers that have calves that excel at these traits will have feeders lined up to purchase their calves. Market access is a challenge to the small producer. Carcass traits that improve profitability most include carcass weight, marbling, ribeye, and to a lesser extent, backfat. “It pays to finish cattle bigger because adding pounds cheapens your breakeven price most of the time. Performance is better in heavier finished cattle. Tonn explained that finding a balance between farm traits, growth and carcass traits, and a strong health program is the key to garnering premium calf prices from feeders.

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