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COW-CALF PRODUCTION IN PARTIAL CONFINEMENT

Here is a selection of comments about the potential of partial confinement for beef cow-calf operations gleaned from presentations at a San Antonio Texas Beef Symposium.

Nebraska Consulting Nutritionist Bill Dicke reports that more of his clients are adapting different forms of confinement production for various classes of cattle. “In addition to the standard cow operation, we’re seeing more replacement heifer development on both a small and large scale. One client is involved in a very large export program that has been very successful,” he says. “If young people can work out a way to work with a feedyard, or perhaps an older stockman, and own some cows without having to have a huge land base, it’s a great way to get new blood into the industry,” he says.

“You need a couple of things to make this work. One of the key ones is a cheap filler of some kind because 50%-75% of your diet is going to be some low-quality roughage combined with a higher-protein byproduct. So if you’re in an area that doesn’t have either of those, you’re facing a little different scenario,” Dicke says.

Ron Crocker, Texas Cattleman - Crocker says a key to making the system work was settling on a cow condition they wanted to maintain via feeding; they weighed the cows every 21 days. “We arrived at a ration of 12½-14 lbs. of dry matter/day depending on their intake of a 47% cotton burr ration,” Crocker says. “That’s what we fed them in a rotational grazed 450 pasture.”

Dave McClellan, Nebraska Nutritionist says his client base consists basically of family-owned, farmer-feeder operations with one-time feeding capacities of 5,000-12,000 head and who farm 8,000-15,000 acres. Among his clients, he estimates there are a total of about 5,000-6,000 head of cows maintained in some degree of confinement. He says these farmer-feeders have evolved their confinement cow programs so that the cows calve in late May and June, or late August to October, to better dovetail with the seasonal farming schedule. Multiple breeding herds also allow better use of bulls.

McClellan is pleased with the results. “Our breeding rates are excellent; in many places, we’re down to less than a 60-day breeding season. We target 60 days, but quite often have the bulls out of there at 45-50 days,” he says. “We’re doing a better job of feeding the cow and meeting her needs, and helping that maternal immunity that gets passed to that calf.” Hoop confinement operations can be designed for \$1000 to 1250 per cow space. Having access to 1-2 quarters of farm ground adjacent to the facility allows for easy access to crop residues, cover crop grazing, and manure utilization.

Jim Simpson, Texas Nutritionist says his formula provides 3 ft./animal of bunk space, which he says is a limitation to filling feedlot pens. “Typically on a finishing program, we’re 9-10 in. of bunk space, with 150 to 180 sq. ft./animal. So bunk space is my limitation.”

Calving done in the pens, he reports. “We were very concerned about respiratory issues, and possibly some gut-health issues, but they haven’t been there. He advises bedding pens in wet conditions during calving, “Ideally, you’d want a pasture or paddock to put them on,” he adds.

Paul Defoor, Cactus Feeders says “We thought we could drylot cows and produce calves in confinement because our long-term projections were that the cowherd was in for a pretty rough ride.” Today, Cactus has about 8,000 breeding females located at a former feedlot facility in Syracuse, KS. During the recent prolonged drought, Defoor says Cactus averaged about \$1.50/cow/day in feed costs, with a total enterprise cost of about \$2/head/day.

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