

Cow Size: Is Bigger Better?

Does cow size matter in beef production? What is the right size for a beef cow? How do we effectively measure cow size and/or performance? Many producers comment that they prefer moderate-sized cows, usually 1100-1200 pounds. How many producers have 1200 pound cows or actually know what their cows weigh? Good questions with different answers among many different producers. However, let's look deeper into producer preferences and its relationship regarding cow performance and efficiency.

What do majority of the cattle producers prefer in terms of mature cow size? In most instances, when it comes to buying replacement heifers or cows, producers like large, high-performance females. Attend any cow or heifer sale and you will see that the larger, heavier cows and heifers command the highest prices. Data from Show-Me Select Bred Heifer Sales indicate that 1200 pound or greater heifers bring \$300 - \$400 more per head than heifers weighing less than 1000 pounds. A 1200 pound, 20-month old bred heifer translates to a 1400 pound mature cow, whereas a 950 pound heifer is a 1100 pound mature cow. We, as cattle producers, like to look at those big heavy cows in our front pastures.

Do those big, heavy cows and heifers actually make you more money? Some data from North Dakota State University (NDSU) may suggest otherwise. So here is some information to ruminate on. Kris Ringwall, NDSU Beef Cattle Specialist, summarized cows according to their average weight and their respective performance. Cows were allocated to 100-pound increments and weaning percentages were calculated. The 1200 pound cows and lighter weaned 50 percent of their fall weight (37 head at 1242 pounds) with 617 pound calves.

The 1300 pound cows weaned 45 percent of their fall weight (39 head at 1357 pounds) with 611 pound calves. The 1400 pound cows (38 head at 1456 pounds) weaned 41 percent of their fall body weight with 589 pound calves. The 1500 pound cows (33 at 1549 pounds) weaned 39 percent of their fall weight with 598 pound calves. The 22 cows that weighed more than 1600 pounds (1698 pounds) weaned 34% of their fall weight with 572 pound calves.

Not only did the percentage of cow weight weaned decrease as cow weight increased, the actual weaning weight of the calves decreased. Therefore, those heavier cows actually made you less total dollars in terms of calf sales.

Something else to think about is number of cows. If your farm has the capability of supporting 100 head of 1400 pound cows, that same farm should have the capability of supporting 120 head of 1200 pound cows. The primary difference is the smaller cows would eat less forage. How many producers would like to sell an additional 16-20 calves every year?

May all your cows calves.

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