

LOW COST COW/CALF PROGRAM

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This is a Business??

The business of the North American cow-calf producer is the harvesting of solar energy. If he allows the cattle to do the harvesting, he is in a highly profitable business. His business has the proud distinction of being energetically sustainable. If you mess around with this principle, you fall in with the industry average of making a profit during ½ of the cattle cycle and losing it during the other ½. The industry is the way it is because it is production orientated. Weaning weight is the big culprit. Do we purchase bulls from herds whose calves are not heavy at weaning? For most of us, no! How are heavy weaning weights achieved? - by early (winter) calving and the feeding of a lot of supplemental energy (mostly hay and oilseed meals) during the winter. Where are the genetics? That is not important – feed is. Another production criterion involves the replacement heifer. Beyond weaning weight, she must have four teats, be sound and be the correct color. Most importantly, however, **every chosen female calf must conceive.** And we make certain of conception by feeding. The question (put to the experts) is, “how can I manage my cow/calf herd without supplemental feed energy?” The answer should come from our institutions of higher learning where there is a dearth of land, animals, facilities, libraries, expertise and beau-coups of taxpayer money. Faculty economists tell us to sell only when prices are high. To do otherwise could mean financial disaster. The universities thus are aware that this is a very marginal business because of high inputs.

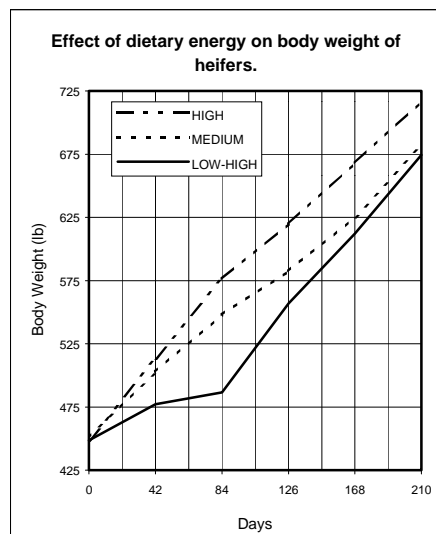
Ongoing Saga

What do the experts recommend? Feed and more feeding; spend and more spending. There is no alternative. A county agent recently insisted to an alumnus of the School that he must feed his replacement heifers if they were expected to conceive and enter the herd as worthwhile cows. This came along with recommendations to feed other herd entities. He may as well have said, “**you broke.**” The insistence upon the necessity for high inputs suggests that the species *bovidae* and the species

John Deere evolved simultaneously.

Starving Heifers

A recent report out of Clay Center¹, NE shows that heifer calves do not have to experience a constant and relatively high rate of gain from weaning to breeding in order to conceive. Weaned heifers were divided into three groups and fed the same diet in drylot pens. The first group was fed to gain about 1.25 lb daily and the second limit fed to gain 1 lb daily throughout the 205-day period. The third group was fed to gain about ½ lb per day for the first 84 days and then to gain 1.5 lb for the remaining 121 days of the study. The study was replicated using calves born in March of '96 and '97. The body weights of the heifers, at different time intervals during the study, are shown in the following chart. At the end of the 205 d drylot phase, the heif-



ers were commingled in breeding pastures. At 412 days of age, bulls were put into the pastures and remained for 63 d.

Great Anticipation

So, what happened? **Nothing!** The chart above uses the average weights of the cattle for both years. There was a difference in performance between years '96 and '97. That is to be expected when cattle spend any amount of time in a pasture situation. Each year is different for quality and quan-

tity of forage produced. The percentage of cows that calved, expressed as a percentage of cows exposed, did not differ with treatment (89.7%). Age of cows at parturition (709 d) and time from first bull exposure to calving (297 d) did not differ across treatments. Calf birth weights did not differ with treatment (74.3 lb). Weaning weight of calves (421 lb) did not differ. The second-calf pregnancy rate (92.8%) of cows with a nursing calf (at the start of breeding) did not differ among treatments. If you expected the LOW-HIGH group, which had dietary energy restricted for 84 days, to not perform well, you are disappointed. Other studies, previously reported here, involved greater restriction, e.g., no gain over a much longer period. Following a period to recover weight and condition (aided by compensatory gain), reproductive performance was normal. What will be the recommendation of the experts after reviewing studies such as this one? Feed and more feeding; spend and more spending.

More Choice

We wish to express our sincere appreciation to the many individuals who volunteered to receive the Newsletter via our Website. Reduction of printing and postal costs will enable us to continue the Newsletter at no charge. ***Are there any more volunteers out there?*** Please contact us at your convenience (rhdiven@aol.com) if you wish to access the Newsletter via the Internet. You will be notified by e-mail the moment a new Newsletter has been posted.

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¹ Freetly, H.C., C.L. Ferrell and T.G. Jenkins. 2001. Production performance of beef cows raised on three different nutritionally controlled heifer development programs. *J. Anim. Sci.* 79:819.