

## **BeefTalk 596: Cattle Size Is Different Than Cow Size**

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This discussion starts with a very popular topic, which is cattle size. One could say cow, bull or calf size. However, in reality, all cattle have a relevant body size and, like all species, the variation in size is huge.

Not only the absolute size, but the shape of the body mass also is very variable. Bone, muscle and fat wrapped in hide make up the container that holds all the other assorted organs and essentials.

Remarkably, all living things need to be in biological balance within themselves, so one does not see a huge variance in how cattle are put together. In other words, large, medium and small types tend to have the same working parts and, for all practical considerations, in the same proportion as all members of the herd. That being said, the obvious constraints of larger or smaller cattle rest more with the management of the producer's system than the actual size of the cattle.

However, rest assured that those managerial systems differ widely and those differences are very real and impact the bottom line of any cattle operation.

Recently, the Dickinson Research Extension Center started harvesting the 2010-born steers. The data sheets beg the question whether appropriate cattle size is determined by those who harvest or those who produce. It is a given that those in the middle will accommodate those who harvest and those who produce, if the cattle are healthy and convert feed efficiently.

If one reflects on several decades of experience and recommendations on cattle size, one will find very authoritative statements on what is appropriate. In one decade, large carcasses are strongly discouraged and, in the next decade, strongly encouraged. This pattern of changing authoritative opinions always is present when biology and money interact.

The bottom line is that beef supplies and the associated demand really drive product need. If the product is short, then larger carcasses are welcomed. The situation right now means the center is marketing larger cattle.

Last September, the center harvested steers at 1,230 pounds live weight. These steers hung on the rail at 747 pounds dressed. A second set of random, similar steers stayed at the ranch all summer and was shipped in the fall. These calves averaged 1,373 pounds live weight and averaged 851 pounds dressed on the rail.

The two sets of steers were the same type and all born in the spring of 2010. The heaviest carcass in the September group was 890 pounds, while the heaviest carcass in the early January group was 948 pounds. From a producer point of view, the same set of conventional-type cows, bred to typical industry bulls, can produce calves that have an acceptable size at harvest solely determined by managerial protocols.

That flexibility is good because producers have considerable leeway in adopting a management package

that fits the ranch. What is important is to take note of this neutral zone or, better stated, the range in carcass weights that those who harvest are willing to accept without applying a discount.

Market discounts are a money thing and do not reward or penalize various cattle types for biological reasons. Rather, market discounts and premiums reflect short-term (in some cases long-term) anticipated market desires, thus steering producers to produce for an anticipated marketable product.

For these two sets of calves, that neutral zone in terms of cattle size was from 550 to 999 pounds hot carcass weight. The industry needs a large spread in harvested acceptable carcass weights to allow for the implementation of regional and local managerial options for raising cattle.

From a cattle producer's perspective, the challenge is in contrast to those who harvest because cattle size is more than money on the rail. There are real biological and managerial impacts to cow size. Please note that cow size is not cattle size. Production efficiency rests within the cow herd and is land-based, not pen-based.

Therefore, as those who harvest may send signals that larger hot carcass weights are acceptable, those who produce must be careful not to chase the wrong end of the stick. The cow must meet her environment and, as noted earlier, the package is one of bone, muscle and fat that is held together with a good hide. All four must be maintained, as reflected in cow condition, regardless of the feed source.

Easier-fleshing cows will weather the decades of product demand well, but always, even at the producer level, one must be alert to that neutral zone of acceptable hot carcass weight on the rail.

If ever, in the days of short supply, the concept of increasing acceptable carcass weights gains momentum by those who harvest, those who produce should beware.

Makes one think of the good terminal breeding systems where "cows that fit the producer are bred to the bulls that fit the market."

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

## **Cattle Size – Case In Point,**

The same set of conventional type cows, bred to typical industry bulls can produce calves that have an acceptable size at harvest solely determined by managerial protocols.

### **DREC March-April Born Calves**

**Set one** – Backgrounded, Spring Feedlot - September harvest,  
1230 pounds live weight,  
747 pounds dressed.

**Set two** – Backgrounded, Summer grass, Fall Feedlot - January harvest,  
1373 pounds live weight,  
851 pounds dressed.