

Tough Conversations

Jason Duggin

Extension Specialist

The topic of cow size could lead to some tough conversations on our operations. Cow inputs account for most of an operation's expenses on a per head basis. With that in mind, let's look at cow weights and how they might affect net return.

Cows in peak lactation require forage and/or feedstuffs providing at least 60% TDN and 12% CP per head / per day. Using those requirements, a 1,200 lbs. cow needs 24 lbs. of dry matter. A 1,400 lb. mature cow needs 27 lbs. dry matter, and cows weighing 1,600 lbs. need approximately 31 lbs. An 1,800 lb. cow requires 33 lbs. These are approximations based on weight, but they do not account for adverse weather, breed type and genetic differences in the cow population. Each lb. of forage and feed has a cost assigned to the bottom line. If heavier cows can wean additional lbs., then there is hope, but do they wean heavier calves? This is a question we need to answer on our own operations.

For illustration, let's expect that mature cows should wean at least 45% of their body weight in lbs. of live calf. Using 45% as our standard, here are example cow weights (lbs.) and corresponding calf weights (lbs.): 1,200 cow - 540 calf; 1,400 cow - 630 calf; 1,600 cow - 720 calf; 1,800 cow - 810 calf. Many may ask why anyone would have 1,600 and 1,800 cows. They happen more than we might think. Weighing and



recording cow weights annually is a great way to monitor cow nutrition and health. As the saying goes, the scale doesn't lie.

As an anecdotal example, I broke down some of the recent weaning weights and corresponding cow weights on cows 3 to 12 years old at the Research and Education Center in Rome, GA. Here is a summary of cow weight groups in roughly 100 to 150 lbs. increments and the corresponding percentage of calf weaned.

The 59 head of cows weighing between 1220 and 1395 weaned calves weighing 617 lbs. with a percent dam weight weaned of 45%. The 56 head of cows weighing between 1400 and 1495 weaned calves averaging 617 lbs. exactly like the previous group but resulting in 41% of dam weight. The 24 head ranging from 1500 to 1600 lbs. weaned calves weighing an average of 613 lbs. which is 39% of dam weight. Lastly, 10 head weighing between 1605 and 1695 weaned calves averaging 611 lbs. or 35.5% of dam weight. Looking at these numbers we can see that cows over 1400 lbs. did not meet our standard of 45% in this example. This is a lenient number. Ideally, commercial cows would be weaning 50 to 60% of their weight with sufficient rainfall.

In the above example, which group of cows brought the most net return to the operation? These are tough conversations on our operations. However, using a set of scales and EPDs associated with cow cost such as MW, \$EN and \$W, for example, can be helpful tools to improve the bottom line.



UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA

EXTENSION

Jason Duggin

Extension Specialist

Department of Animal and
Dairy Sciences

College of Agricultural &
Environmental Sciences

University of Georgia