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Pasture to Profit Podcast
Transcription of Cow size considerations, episode 20

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BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION

00;00;16;06 - 00;00;57;26
Unknown
Well welcome back. It's 2025 and we're back with your Pasture to Profit podcast. I'm your host today, Travis Taylor, extension livestock specialist for the Golden Plains area here in Colorado for CSU. And I'm joined by fellow colleague Scott Stinnett. He's the 4-H and livestock specialist in Kit Carson County here for the Golden Plains. Scott, will you and I kind of did a podcast right there before Christmas where we were talking about things to ponder as we went into Christmas break and things to talk about at those family gatherings when you're talking cows and dealing with livestock.

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And out of that, we started talking a little bit about herd rebuilding. And, you know, some of that herd rebuilding has been offset with the fact that we're selling larger carcasses these days in the beef industry. So with that, what are some thoughts or points that maybe we should think about when we start talking about possibility of rebuilding our cowherd as we see some higher beef prices?

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Well, Travis, I think the thing that kind of stands out to me in a lot of the information that we get is right now where we're at, we're seeing some really high prices on replacement females, whether they're bred, running aged cows or they're bred heifers. And we're having some people run some numbers on whether or not they can financially afford to pay for those prices, and if they'll make their money back on this female over her, over her lifetime.

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And so with that, we see the higher carcasses that are going to slaughter. The USDA gave us slaughter report, the last one here on January 4th of 2025. And overall carcass animal size was live weight was 1433 and the dressed carcass was 870 pounds. Now this is steers, heifers, cows, bulls all mixed together. We just talked a little bit and saw some information from the LM.

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I see that our finished steers and heifers are averaging carcasses over 970 pounds, which if we take it back to about a 63% dressing percentage. These are live weight animals that are 1490 to over 1,500 pounds. So some extremely large animals. So the question is how did we get to that point? Well, how we got to that point was our cows are bigger.

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We're putting more product, more pounds on each animal. And so the average cow right now is about 1,350 pounds. So 1350 when we started looking at cattle sizes and looking back in the 50s and 60s, when we had before the big continental importation, cows were running about an average size of about 1,000 pounds. So we've increased over the past since the 70s.

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Before that kicks in, we increased cattle sizes about 350 pounds on the average. So it's got that. That kind of brings us to a point that, you know, we've got that same range out there and we're going back to that same pasture year after year, and we're trying to put 50 cows out there or 100 cows. Let's use 100 for the sake of discussion.

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We've got a pasture that dad or granddad used to put 100 cows in. That change in cow size is put a drastic pressure on that pasture. Exactly. So our average producer right now is in their late 50s to early 60s in the beef industry. So if you went out to granddad's place, run cows and those cows are weighing about 1,000 pounds back then when you were a kid and you're raising 1,350 pound average cows, you've increased your the number of cows on that place by 35%, 350 pounds.

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And so what's that equate to. Well that equates to an extra five maybe even six cows that are out there on that same pasture taking in the forage. And if you use that daily 3% consumption of a cow to keep them going over 180 days with five extra head of cows, that's 36,000 pounds of forage that they're going to consume in 180 day grazing period out on the summer pasture.

00;05;12;02 - 00;05;37;02
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So thinking about that, where granddad might have had 100 cows out there, you've added another 5 or 6 cows to it. That's a lot of extra pressure on that same grazing. I think that that makes sense as we start to look at what we've done. I mean, we we have the genetics that are adding that to the cow size.

00;05;37;02 - 00;06;09;09

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We're also they have calves, right. And those calves, as we get them into mid-summer late fall, start consuming a lot more forage too. So we've not only increased the weight of those cows, we're also increasing the weight of those calves that are also towards the end consuming forage. So we have really shortened what I would deem as our grazing days on those pastures, with some increased production in cow size there.

00;06;09;12 - 00;06;39;11
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So you and I were both talking a little bit that maybe you could share with us that thought pattern of what are we actually looking at producing? We need to maybe adjust instead of saying we need to sell so many heads a year, maybe look at a different vantage point of what we're doing to to ensure that we have some range quality left for those cows and to meet their needs.

00;06;39;13 - 00;07;01;03
Unknown
Exactly. So, so many of us and and I'm guilty of it for the cows that we've had and raised, we're trying to get a number one with cows. We want to percentage calf crop 95 to 100% where we really want to be. And we think about, you know, what's the average I got per head and how many head did I sell.

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But if we can tweak that just a little bit on our thought process and not think about how many head did we sell, but how many pounds total did we sell? So how many pounds of live animal did we sell, let's say this fall 600 pound calves. We're getting $3 a pound. How many total pounds did we sell at $3.

00;07;22;27 - 00;07;55;24
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And if we could take our units that direction. Maybe it's not so scary. Now, if I need to rebuild to that 100 head that I've always had on that pasture, maybe we can be at 90 to 95, head on that pasture. We're getting less grazing pressure by not having those extra cows. We've allowed for more grazing potential for our weaning calves that are eating grass, still nursing a little bit, but they need the grass grow because that's what's really going to grow.

00;07;55;26 - 00;08;34;23
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And if we can go to sale to market with higher weight calves, maybe a lower number will still get the same amount of income we would if we had lighter weight calves, but more of them. So a total poundage that we marketed versus a total number of heads that we market. Well, I think it's back to us. It's not only on the calf side as we start to look at that, just looking at the numbers that you put out going from 1050 years ago to 1350 today, we're going to sell for every four coal cows.

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We're going to sell an extra 1200 and or 1300 plus pounds on those animals as well. So we don't have to cull as many cows. And we're still producing more total pounds of beef off the ranch. Whether it be those cold cows that oftentimes make up up to 20% of total sales on a lot of ranching operations, it really gets back to that point of view that we really need to look at our range, resources and understand what we have there and be able to adjust our carrying numbers to meet that environment and provide that high quality nutritional level year round for those cows and calves out on range.

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Yeah, correct. And the other thing to think about, let's think about going forward. So on average over that 50 years our cow size is increased 350 pounds. So that's 7 pounds a year that our cows average in the United States have gotten larger. So if we continue on this trend, the cows that we have now that are 1350 in 5 years, they're going to gain in another 35 pounds in weight.

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So we're talking 1385 is going to be the average cow size in five years. Well how many more pounds of forage does that cow need to maintain herself to grow a calf. We really ought to think about that. So maybe not having maybe not replacing the herd, maybe not filling ourselves back up to that normal what we consider our normal number of head of cattle that we have, because we're going to be bringing in bigger cattle over the next five years if the trend continues and they're going to be consuming more than the cattle today are, we're going to put even more stress on our forage resources out there in those pastures.

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But now, on the reverse of that, I've also looked up what's the weaning size done? Well, in the past 50 years, weaning sizes have increased about 66 pounds, which doesn't sound like a lot, but if you're you're increasing about 1.32 pounds every year. So you get down the road another five years and you've increased 7 to 8 more pounds on each calf relative to the count.

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So you've got more product to sell. Yeah, I think I think it all gets to be cumulative. So my takeaway from this when we have this discussion is number one we definitely need to know what our resources are. Number two I think we need to definitely pay attention to our cow size. I think you and I would both agree that the more a cow can be out grazing and making a living or for herself, the better off we are economically.

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You, being that economist, in this equation, that brings in a little bit of the numbers for me that economists that would say if we don't have to

harvest it and haul it to her, it's probably a more profitable way to feed her. So the longer we can keep them out there grazing and keep them in a true cow form, collecting their own forage, we're better off from an economic standpoint.

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Yeah. No doubt. The other thing, though, that I think producers really should probably think about is if you're wondering how big your cows are. Figure out what the weights were, or find out what the weights were and the cows that you called this fault, you know, see what those average weights are of cows that are in that number five, maybe even a six body condition score.

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That average score. What were their weights? And if you've got old tickets from the sale barn of calling your old cows, how much have your cult cows increased in size? And if you see they're increasing in size, it probably means you're cowherd in general is increasing in size. So I'm going to make one more little jump. So you don't want to go out and pay for these $3,000 bread heifers.

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You're going to retain more of your own. Well, remember our old rule of thumb is we want to breed a heifer. And we want to make sure that when it comes calving time, she's about 65% of her body weight. Well, 65% of her body weight at 1,350 pounds is over 870 pounds. And I think a lot of us would think about heifers needing to be in the seven range, 750, maybe 800, but now we're talking another 175 to 100 pounds larger to meet the average mature size that we're seeing in the United States of 1350.

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Yeah, I think that therein lies a lot of the issue that we have. Right. We keep our better, higher performing heifers and we keep those Jeffers breeding. And they need to meet that minimum so that if you figure that an 870 pound heifer needs to gain 250 pounds, you're talking about first calf heifers calving closer to 1,200 pounds.

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When we used to think about them at 1000 to 1050 pounds. So again, to get those cows there, it's taking us some additional resources on top of that. So yeah, it just all kind of cumulatively adds to the pot. In terms of what we're doing. So I'm going to say that for this Pasture to Profit podcast, our main takeaway is maybe we should do some research and figure out just how big our cows are and what's fitting our environment, and be able to maybe get some estimates on what we actually have growing in terms of our range and what we're able to do in terms of forage out there so that we can

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better match what we're our production to our environment. I think you're correct in that, you know, so for us, being an extension, if you need help figuring out what your range is producing, we can help you with that from our extension offices. If you want to know what your cows are weighing, I think your two best friends are going to be your scale or any scale tickets that you have from from sales that you've done on your marketing, your cold cows.

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Once you have those basic information in your hands, you can start doing some calculations of knowing. My cows are averaging this size, which means they need to eat this much forage. And I know that I have this much forage available in my pastures, and so realistically, you may not be as far off in your needs for replacing your cowherd, especially if your cowherd has grown in mature size, not necessarily a number of head.

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Well, I think that will kind of wrap up this Pasture to Profit podcast. And if you have any questions about this one or topics that you'd like to suggest for another podcast, please contact either myself, Travis Taylor at the Yuma County Extension Office in Wray at (970)332-4151. Or Scott, where can they drop topics off to you. Right. I'm here in the Kit Carson County office in Burlington, Colorado.

00;16;04;17 - 00;16;14;28
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You can reach me at (719)346-5571. Well, until we see you again, this has been our Pasture to Profit podcast.

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