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The Consequences of Shortcuts in Beef Cattle Production

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Taking shortcuts on a beef cattle operation can have advantages but can also produce some undesirable or unintended consequences. Sometimes taking the easy route can be a recipe for disaster in terms of production output, animal value, and/or profitability. There are many potential pitfalls for producers looking to cut corners to save time, labor, or money.

It is important to recognize the potential consequences of these shortcuts before implementing them. By spending more effort and resources up front, often less effort and fewer resources are needed in the long run and more productivity occurs. Examples of shortcuts in genetics, health, nutrition, and reproduction are listed below along with possible outcomes.

Shortchanging Genetics

- Buying a “cheap” bull with lower quality genetics
Potential consequences: fewer live calves, lower calf value, less productive raised replacement females, lower bull salvage value
- Using a bull with no EPDs
Potential consequences: fewer live calves, lower calf value, less productive raised replacement females, lower bull salvage value
- Not tracking herd performance
Potential consequences: less productive cows and bulls retained, lower calf value, higher cost per calf, less productive replacement females
- Not using performance data (EPDs in seedstock operations) in selection and culling decisions
Potential consequences: less productive cows and bulls retained, lower calf value, higher cost per calf, less productive replacement females
- Not taking advantage of a well-planned crossbreeding program
Potential consequences: reduced direct and maternal heterosis, lower reproductive performance of raised replacements, shorter productive life of raised females, more replacements needed, reduced calf survivability, lower weaning weights

Shortchanging Herd Health

- Ignoring internal parasite control
Potential consequences: reduced average daily gains, lower milk production, poor rebreeding performance, reduced appetite and intake, tissue damage, protein loss, fluid loss, anemia, impaired immune function

- Ignoring external parasite control
Potential consequences: disease spread, reduced average daily gains, lower milk production, poor rebreeding performance, anemia, hide damage
- Not implementing a biological risk management (biosecurity) plan
Potential consequences: greater disease exposure, higher risk of infectious disease spread and possible outbreak, disease control more difficult, greater health risk to cattle and humans, increased chance of production losses
- Not implementing an appropriate vaccination program
Potential consequences: higher disease risk, increased chance of production losses, higher treatment costs, reduced product value, greater cattle death loss
- Not seeking veterinary assistance when needed
Potential consequences: production losses, more risk of a treatable condition progressing to an untreatable state, increased animal suffering, higher cattle death loss, greater disease risk for healthy cattle in the herd

Shortchanging Nutrition

- Transitioning cattle onto a new feed too quickly
Potential consequences: acidosis, bloat, feed intake fluctuations, lower cattle performance, cattle death loss
- Not limit feeding a feed with a high risk of overeating
Potential consequences: acidosis, bloat, feed intake fluctuations, lower cattle performance, cattle death loss
- Skimping on heifer nutrition during development
Potential consequences: target breeding weights not reached, delayed puberty, advanced age at first calving, higher dystocia risk, expected mature weights not reached in stunted cattle, lower lifetime productivity
- Poorly managing cow body condition
Potential consequences: thin cows at calving, more rebreeding problems, extended or delayed calving season in subsequent calf crop, lower milk production, lighter calves at weaning
- Grazing cattle continuously instead of on a rotational system
Potential consequences: lower pasture carrying capacity, lower forage persistence and pasture productivity, fewer forage species effectively utilized, more trampling damage to plants, more concentrated urine and manure distribution, less close observation of cattle, less likely to recognize animal health problems quickly, more cattle handling problems, lower overall forage management, reduced environmental benefits

Shortchanging Reproduction

- Putting a bull out with more cows than he can reasonably service
Potential consequences: open cows, drawn out calving season, thin bull
- Being slack about proper heat detection or artificial insemination technique
Potential consequences: open cattle, more bull power needed, drawn out calving season, higher cost per calf

- Infrequently observing late gestation females
Potential consequences: higher chance of calving difficulty going unaddressed, more risk of inadequate colostrum intake, greater cow and calf death losses, increased calf health problems, less productive calves, rebreeding problems in cows that underwent dystocia
- Not pregnancy checking in a timely manner
Potential consequences: open cows continue to consume resources, reproductive problems not identified in a timely manner and more difficult to troubleshoot
- Not maintaining a controlled breeding and calving season
Potential consequences: difficult to match forage and feed resources to herd nutrient needs, more effort needed to monitor breeding and calving, reproductive problems not identified in a timely manner and more difficult to troubleshoot, more challenging to plan and implement effective herd health programs, smaller contemporary groups, less uniform calf groups for marketing

Ask the question, “Is it worth the risk?” when deciding whether or not to cut corners on a beef cattle operation. In some instances, such as when not maintaining a controlled breeding and calving season, more work is actually created instead of labor and time savings. For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.