

Many people know and even live by the phrase “bigger is better” and strive to have the biggest and largest quantity of something, whether it is their house, clothing, vehicle, etc. Maybe you argue that you’re not concerned about those things, and concentrate on more important things instead, such as your cattle. You aim to have big cows so they will raise big calves for you to sell and make a big profit on at weaning. Or, you focus on selecting for cattle with high numbers for production traits (such as milk production or growth rate). But how big is big “enough”, and how much profit is “good enough”? More importantly, is there a tipping point where big is too big, and a trait is selected for so much that other traits suffer significantly? This week we will discuss this issue and present some answers to these questions.

A common misconception amongst cattle producers is that increased cow size will create increased calf weaning weight, which will result in increased income and increased profit. Although this may occur in some operations, studies show that for every 100 pounds of additional weight put on a cow, only 6 pounds would be added to her calf’s weight. This equated to being worth \$5-7. The cost for carrying one of these outsized cows was \$42, and resulted in a net **loss** of \$35 per cow/calf unit. In other words, the benefit of producing heavier weaned calves was simply not enough to justify the extra maintenance required to tend to the outsized cows.

Another study shows that although milk yield does affect weaning weight, selecting for higher milk yield in your cows will not always convert to calf weight. In fact, it has been found that each pound of milk essentially produces less pounds of calf growth than the pounds of milk that preceded them. This is the same concept that added pounds of fertilizer beyond a certain point will begin to produce less crop. Unfortunately, producers continue to over-select for one single trait in their cattle. Many producers may see a weakness in their females, set out to correct it by selecting for that trait, but then go overboard, which may create a weakness in other areas. Evidence reveals that milk production has skyrocketed over the past years, but these same modern heavy milking cows have such high demands on them that they can’t support themselves in most, if not all, natural environments. Further, although they are heavy milkers, they often don’t produce enough additional calf weight to compensate for all of the extra upkeep they require.

Producers should keep in mind that bigger is **not** always better, and that selecting for one good trait is not always the best management decision. We urge you to evaluate your cattle, then determine which traits need the most improvement, and take into consideration how selection for those traits may negatively impact other traits. Are the traits you select for causing problems in other areas with your cattle? If you have any questions about selection for traits, and how traits can be used to produce ideal cattle in your herd, please contact us. To read the complete magazine article referenced in this week’s article, visit <http://www.cattlenetwork.com/news/newport-time-change-directions>.

Thanks,
Jesse Richardson, DVM

Henderson County Veterinary Hospital