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Raise or Buy Herd Replacements?

A key decision facing producers with small cow/calf herds is raising or purchasing replacement heifers. Producers should evaluate the replacement female enterprise separate from the rest of the cow/calf enterprise and identify its economic strengths and weaknesses. Typically, to maintain herd size, a producer needs replace about 15% to 30% of the cull cows each year.

Advantages for raising replacements can be reduced risk of bringing in disease or disposition problems from an outside herd. The heifer type that fits your cow herd and environment fall right in line. Knowing the upbringing and health history can be helpful when planning cow vaccination programs.

Raising replacements require expensive additional management that's often not financially justifiable. To reach maturity for breeding, heifers must be managed apart from the cow herd. This added management starts at weaning. The first 14-21 days after weaning requires vigilance against the high risk of sickness. Sound holding pens are required to keep heifers in. Since their nutritional needs are higher than a mature cow, they will need high quality pasture to grow to puberty to breed at 14 to 15 months old. Sound fencing is again called for during this growth to keep bulls away before breeding season.

Heifers need to reach 85-90% of their mature weight before calving to ensure breed back after calving. The development phase of heifers will affect their lifetime productivity. Taking shortcuts in management will affect the value of the female for her entire productive life.

Other necessary resources are veterinary costs, vaccinations, pregnancy confirmation, proper facilities for transportation, bull or AI costs. And then there's opportunity costs that shouldn't be overlooked; operator labor, cull income or owned feed resources.

There are a number of factors to consider in purchasing replacement females. How much time do you have to find the heifer type you require? Will this be a consistent supply? Generally, by purchasing heifers, the herd can be expanded or changed genetically in less time than raising replacements. Buying replacements can free up pastures for about 10% more cows in an operation.

Market prices often play a very large role in the decision of selling or retaining high value heifers. If market prices are high, and your females are in demand by other producers, it may be more profitable to sell females raised on farm, and purchase outside heifers.

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