

# Goal Setting

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A majority of cattle producers do not have goals with regard to their cow herd. Most of the management decisions are made based on the current set of circumstances being faced. It is important to decide what fits your farm the best and stick with it. In the beef cow business it takes several years to change the looks and productivity of your herd so if those goals are changing by large degrees you will never get to the goal, it simply takes too long. There are any number of goals that an individual can set but I would like to discuss a few in this month's column that could make a difference on your operation. If you don't write the goals down and revisit them then you are likely not to achieve them.

**Cow size.** Over the years we have done a very good job of increasing average weaning weights of southeastern calves. In addition, we have increased the mature size of our cows by an appreciable amount. It would be wise to determine the optimal cow size for your operation and make a very focused effort to buy replacement females that fit that description. If you raise your own replacements then it is very important to select bulls that will sire "right size" cows. This may mean sacrificing a little on weaning weight to get the kind of cows you need. Obviously, this is long-term management, getting a herd of cows that are the optimal size will take several

years. Nevertheless, it is a goal worth pursuing. It will require a set of scales to make this goal a reality. On that subject I would like to point out that a set of scales can be a very wise investment. As an example, I purchased a set of cattle scales for \$1,500 about 20 years ago and they have been under a roof in the working facility since then. They have weighed hundreds of cattle and are just as accurate today as they were when purchased.

**Calving season.** One of the most important goals that you can have is to have a short calving season. The most important reason for having a defined calving season is improved nutrition for the entire herd. Winter feeding is the single largest cost item in maintaining brood cows and it is impossible to provide adequate nutrition to a group of cows that are in all stages of production. In situations like this a large percentage of the cows are underfed, a significant percentage are overfed and only a handful are fed the appropriate amount. It is much more efficient to feed cows that have similar nutritional requirements (i.e., have a defined calving season). Another crucial benefit of having a defined calving season is that it allows for better observation and care given to cows at calving time. This in turn increases the number of live calves born which is another major economic factor in a cow/calf operation. Whenever the calving season is spread out

over the entire year very little time is devoted to checking on newborn calves. In addition, herd health and management is easier to accomplish. Vaccination, deworming, pregnancy checking and castration are much more likely to be done with a controlled calving season versus a year-round calving season. Likewise, culling and selection of replacements based on

production records becomes achievable. One of the main criteria in evaluating brood cows is the performance of their calves. This evaluation can only be accurate if the cows are compared across a relatively short calving season. The final benefit is the ability to market a uniform group of calves that are similar in age and size. Uniform groups of calves will usually result in a higher price than calves sold individually. The actual goal for most producers should be about a 75- to 90-day calving season. The shorter you make it the shorter you'll want it!

**Forage base.** Every cattleman in Alabama should have the goal of feeding less hay this year than they did last year. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that if you set goals with regard to decreasing your dependence on hay and increasing your utilization of grazed forages, then ultimately you will decrease feed costs for your cow herd. The first thing to do is to document how many days the cows are fed hay and then simply try to reduce that by about 5 days each year. In just a few years you will see worthwhile results. The simplest way to do this is to implement some grazing management strategies (e.g., stockpiling and/or limit-grazing).

I would encourage each and every cattleman to set a few attainable goals for their cattle operation. I have given a few examples but there are numerous areas to improve upon. A worthy goal may also involve the stopping of some action. There may be something that you need to stop doing on your farm and it would improve the operation. The bottom line is to write down a few goals and be sure to put a deadline on the goal. As an extension colleague of mine says "A goal without a deadline is nothing more than a wish".



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