

Composition and Plans for Utilization of the Teaching Cow Herd

Bryan Reiling

Animal Science Department
University of Florida

The composition of students enrolled in Animal Science has changed dramatically in the past decade. Today, many of our students have essentially no livestock experience, but they want to become involved with agriculture and, more specifically, they want to be associated with the beef industry. Additionally, our industry has undergone tremendous change. We have been inundated with technological advances to improve efficiency of production, but sound business management is essential to the long-term success of any operation. The use of computers to evaluate business and marketing decisions and to access critical information has become widespread. Additionally, the industry is being bombarded by a plethora of issues: consistency and quality of our product, implementation of value-based marketing and formula pricing, captive supplies, the formation of alliances, food safety, etc...etc. This combination of events poses a very unique challenge. How do we expose students to new technology and the wide array of issues facing our industry when so many of our students have a limited background in production agriculture?

The unique, urbanized student profile provides special challenges, but it also provides opportunity for our industry. It provides us an opportunity to educate the urban population about ranching practices, about land stewardship and cattle grazing, about health and meat products, etc. It provides

opportunity for the industry to objectively evaluate itself by those less emotionally involved, and it provides opportunity to foster fresh ideas and innovative thinking.

Thus, it is imperative that the Department of Animal Science sustain a teaching cow herd that will serve as an integral component of many classes in a sound undergraduate Animal Science curriculum. The herd will be used to expose our introductory students to basic management techniques and principles that are used in the cattle industry. Students who enroll in the "Principles of Beef Management" course will be given the opportunity to work with these animals on a regular basis to gain experience regarding basic beef management practices. As students become more advanced, they will use various technologies that have been developed to aid the decision-making process, and then relate their decisions to the cow herd.

Today, as instructors of Animal Science, we can make no assumptions regarding the basic livestock knowledge of our students. It is our responsibility to fill that void, primarily the agricultural background and related experiences, through "hands-on" involvement. If we are successful, our students will be competent, competitive and successful in their chosen careers, and the beef industry should reap the long-term benefits.