



Jon Taggart finds that Angus and predominantly Angus heifers grow well on his ranch and finish at about 1,100 pounds.

Cow Size Matters

Living Laboratory looks for “sweet spot” when it comes to cow size, stocking rate

By Katrina Huffstutler

Editor’s note: This piece is the third in a series of six on the Texas Christian University Institute of Ranch Management Living Laboratory. In this month’s installment, we’ll focus on the animal resources component of both the university’s teaching and its practical application on Jon Taggart’s operation.

When Jon Taggart entered the grass-finished beef business in 1999, you could say he had a type.

They were Angus and predominantly Angus heifers, easy-fleshing and moderate framed. They worked for him, growing well, and finishing at about 1,100 pounds.

Somewhere along the way, though, he wondered if he could do better. He strayed from his type, bringing in some cattle with different genetics that theoretically should have been well-suited for his area. He also bought more steers. But despite looking good on paper, the switch wasn’t a good one. The cattle didn’t fit his program.

These days, Jon says he’s “back with the one who brought [him] to the dance.” Lesson learned.

The right cow for the job

Jeffrey Geider, William Watt Matthews Director of the Institute of Ranch Management at Texas Christian

University, says the program’s teaching on cow selection is straight-forward.

“First and foremost,” he says, “you have to match the cow to the environment. So, you don’t try to force animals and certain breed types that wouldn’t survive and thrive in certain parts of the country just because you may like them or that’s the breed you chose.”

After that? That is where it gets a little more complicated, Geider says.

“Cow size is a major point of contention and something that is often based on opinions and desires and likes. And then you get into certain breeds being larger than others, and people are passionate when it comes to breeds,” he says. “And all of that is fine.”

But that’s why he approaches the subject purely from an economic standpoint. A larger cow requires more inputs, therefore costing more to maintain. Of course, she may also wean a larger calf that sells for more money, negating some or all of the extra groceries.

“You have to remember it doesn’t always work out that way, though,” Geider says.

Of course, neither the breed or the mature cow size can be the only thing one looks at when selecting replacements.

“All of the things we’re considering should be balanced pretty equally, and you never want to just shoot for one thing,” Geider says. “That tends to be a problem in the cattle industry. We chase this one thing. And a lot of times it is at the expense of a lot of other things. In the long run, those kinds of decisions end up costing us money.”

Moderation in all things

Geider says he firmly believes that moderation is the best way to go.

Taggart agrees.

“In the whole large-cow versus small-cow discussion, that pendulum swings both ways,” Taggart says.

He uses his own finishing operation as an example. Every animal that comes through his gate is destined for the meat case, so carcass size is a priority.

“Those really big carcasses make your steaks too big, and they also produce a lot of grind and trim, which further complicates things,” he says. “But it goes both ways, and if you swing too far, you end up with little bitty ribeyes.”

He says there is a sweet spot for carcass size, easily illustrated by premiums and discounts, but size matters throughout the industry.

“Moderation, moderation, moderation,” Taggart says.

“Moderation is something that we tend to get away from in this industry,” Geider chimes in. “We — and I’m being self-critical here because I’ve made these mistakes, too — shoot for extremes sometimes because we think there is an economic benefit to that.”

But he says that cattlemen must factor everything in, including forage. And sometimes quality means more than quantity.

For example, in the western part of the U.S., where it is shortgrass prairie, smaller cows do very well because they do not consume as much but still meet their nutrition plane. In East Texas, a larger cow spends most of her time eating washy, watery grass and cannot express what she’s meant to genetically.

The customer is always right

But beyond preferences and calculations, Geider says that ranchers must think beyond their own gate.

“I can’t overemphasize that,” he says. “We, as cow-calf people, tend to think in terms of, ‘Well, my goal is to raise a cow and raise a calf. I pass it on, and it’s the next guy’s problem.’ But we need to be extremely focused and conscious of what we are producing and where it is going.”

TCU Tip: You can’t manage what you can’t measure

Geider says that one thing any rancher can do to help find his or her own sweet spot is taking a forage sample and getting it tested for its nutritional value.

“We try to not be prescriptive in any of our advice, but this is one area where we are prescriptive,” Geider says. “I believe it’s imperative to know what you have so you can manage accordingly.”

Once the results come back, he says a cattleman is automatically more accurate when working stocking rate formulas.

“If you can say, ‘I’ve got about an 18% crude protein forage system, and I’ve got x amount of forage per acre, my cows weigh x...,’ now it becomes a lot easier to stock accordingly,” Geider says.

“And if that calf I’m raising is excessively large and it goes on to the stocker phase and the feedlot phase and then it gets into the packing plant at 1,500- or 1,600-pounds live weight, then you’re looking at that 1,100-pound carcass Jon described.”

So, while that bigger calf may seem desirable in the short-term, he may be too much of a good thing in the long-term.

“Packers cannot sell that product,” Geider says. “Moderation is key for them, too, and cattlemen have to remember who they are really marketing to and what their objective is.”

Searching for the balance

In the TCU Ranch Management Living Laboratory, all these decisions surrounding cow selection (or, in Taggart’s case, stocker selection) and numbers are being evaluated with one question in mind: What’s best for the natural resources, yet still profitable for the cattleman?

“We’re always striving to get that pasture in its climax vegetative stage, and by doing just exactly what Jon does — if you’re out there looking at it all the time — you’ll see. You’ll be able to spot seed plants, and you’ll know if you are making progress or going backward,” Geider says. “And if you’re going backward, there’s probably a reason for that. Usually, that reason falls to not being stocked properly.” ■