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Pharo Steers Kansas Graziers Away From Sacred Cows

By Mark Parker

McPherson, Kansas- If Kit Pharo made some folks squirm in their chairs a little at the Kansas Graziers Association Winter Conference, that was okay with him. After all, getting cattlemen out of their comfort zones is one of his goals.

“Dare to be a herd quitter,” Pharo challenged a standing-room-only crowd recently in McPherson, Kan. “Break away from the status quo. Doing what everybody else is doing is very rarely the thing to do and it will never ever give you a competitive advantage.”

The Cheyenne Wells, Colo., producer bolted from the herd a long time ago, questioning conventional cattle wisdom in an effort to corral profit rather than production. In the short-grass, low rainfall country of eastern Colorado, Pharo raises beef and bulls in a system aimed at extremely low-input, sustainable production. His cattle receive no inputs beyond a weaning-time vaccination and a 50-50 salt mineral mix. Feeding hay is a very rare occurrence that happens only under the most extreme conditions.

Relating his own struggle to find profitability in ranching, Pharo discussed the marketplace challenge facing most producers. “Most farmers and ranchers don’t have much control over market prices. They’re in a commodity business and that’s a breakeven business.” Selling a product, rather than a commodity, Pharo said, insulates producers from the cattle cycle but it’s not an easy transition. If it were, he stressed, “Everybody would do it.” Those who continue to produce commodity beef, he stressed, must be better than average in terms of production and, especially, cost of production.

Urging producers to step out of the box they've put themselves in, Pharo advised cattlemen to question business-as-usual beef production strategies.

"Farmers and ranchers are more productive than ever before but it's not showing up in their bottom lines," he said. "...Usually, producers increase production to increase profits but it may be easier to (accomplish that) with reduced expenses."

The average producer makes money when the roller coaster of the cattle cycle peaks and then he loses money in the valleys, Pharo said. Low-input producers—about 10 percent of cattlemen—can make some money even when prices are low but they have to stay focused more on profit than production. Weaning weights, he noted, are an excellent case-in-point. Most cattlemen tend to strive to maximize weaning weights, he pointed out, declaring that most suffer from what he calls "Big Calf Syndrome."

"If you've ever owned at least two cows, you've suffered from Big Calf Syndrome," Pharo stated. "Big calves are not always profitable. Weaning weight has no real meaning without knowing what the cost of producing it is. Higher weaning weights cost you something—bigger cows to maintain, more feed, etc. A lot of Western ranches were put together and paid for with 350-lb. calves and now those same ranches are struggling to make it with 600-lb. calves. You can raise more lightweight calves with fewer inputs and they'll bring a higher per-pound price. You may not be able to brag about weaning weights to your neighbors but, managed correctly, you can put more money in your pocket."

With a goal of making the most efficient use of forage resources, Pharo's strategy focuses on three main components:

- Utilizing planned rotational grazing to provide rest for the grass and maximize harvest efficiency.
- Calving in synch with Mother Nature to match the cow's peak nutritional requirements with the nutritionally highest forage production.
- Developing cows that fit their environment and are productive with minimal inputs while still meeting the requirements of the market place.

In a planned rotational grazing system, Pharo said the rule of thumb is to move the cattle fast when the grass is growing fast and slow when the grass is growing slowly. The aim, he said, is to put the highest number of cattle in the smallest possible area for the shortest amount of time. That, Pharo added, will maximize the rest period for forages and result in greater production as well as providing the opportunity for more highly productive species to re-establish. Most important, the approach increases total beef production per acre while benefiting the land.

Mimicking wildlife in nature by moving calving to a greener time of year reduces feed and labor expenses, he said, and facilitates a higher percentage of calves born early in the calving season.

“It took God six days to create a perfect world and we’ve been trying to improve on it ever since,” observed Pharo whose herd calves in May and June. “You can fool Mother Nature but it costs you dollars and labor to do it. If there’s a profit to be made doing that, fine, but it really makes more sense to calve when the weather’s better and there’s better forage for the cows.”

The Colorado cattleman admitted to one true disadvantage to later calving. When he moved his calving calendar from April to May, he had more problems with bad udders.

“The cows were producing too much milk for the calves,” he said. That brought up another of Pharo’s observations:

“It bothers me that high milk production is equated with maternal traits. I believe milk is a growth trait but it’s an inefficient growth trait. High milk production is inefficient and expensive. Heavy milking cows require more feed for maintenance even when they aren’t lactating. ... Fertility and reproduction are the most important maternal traits and high fertility and high milk are actually antagonistic.”

Cow type in general should be reconsidered, Pharo said. Noting a direct correlation between cow size and cost of production, he suggested that cows are generally too large and have been selected for producing heavy-weaning calves rather than for the ability to produce a calf and breed back on fewer purchased inputs.

“We can’t continue to use the wrong kind of bull to produce the right kind of cows,” Pharo challenged. “A rancher wants an efficient 1100-lb. cow that will wean at least 50% of her own weight for

many years without being pampered. If that's what you really want, you'd better take a hard look at the bulls you're buying."

Pharo suggested that producers put selection pressure on their cowherds by gradually reducing supplemental feed and increasing the stocking rate. As the environment gets tougher, he said, the more efficient cows will be identified.

"We have to put some selection pressure on these cows," Pharo asserted. "Unless you have an unlimited source for really cheap feed, we can't afford big, inefficient cows. If you have grass that will support 100 1400-lb. cows, that same grass will support 120 1100-lb. cows. With the same forage input, you can have more calves, more pounds of beef, and, since the calves are lighter at weaning, they'll bring more per pound."

Along with managing forages for optimum production, selecting for the right kind of cows is critical to profitable beef production, he emphasized.

"Love your wife, forgive your kids and do neither for your cows," he concluded.

The KGA Winter Conference was co-sponsored by the Kansas Rural Center, Kansas Farmers Union, and the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition.

The Kansas Graziers Association is a grassroots organization that promotes sustainable grazing practices. For more information, contact Mary Howell by calling 785-562-8726. Related information is also available at the Kansas Rural Center web site: www.kansasruralcenter.org.