K-State: Bunk space not a big concern when limit feeding cattle

Beef cattle nutritionist finds little difference in gain efficiency

By Shelby Varner, K-State Research and Extension news

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Kansas State University beef cattle nutritionist Dale Blasi said a recent study indicates that the amount of bunk space provided to cattle during limit feeding has little effect on their growth.

Limit feeding is the practice of feeding cattle less dry matter than they would normally consume if given unlimited access to such forages as hay or silage. It is thought that giving cattle more room in the bunk lines or aprons during limit feeding will provide all calves an equal opportunity to consume their intended amount.

Blasi said 18 inches is a common recommendation for bunk space when limit feeding beef cattle. In a recent study, graduate student Zach Duncan evaluated bunk spacing at 10, 15, 20 or 25 inches per calf. Cattle were on limit-fed diets for 58 days and then placed on a native grass, double-stock grazing system for an additional 90 days.

“Our concern was that the timid, smaller calves would not have their opportunity to eat and, thus, the larger, more aggressive calves would eat more than their designated amount of 2.2% of dry matter on a body weight basis,” Blasi said.

Bunk spacing did not seem to make a difference, according to Blasi.

“We only saw an upward increase in performance (when bunk spacing was) 20 inches per animal, and it was not significant when feed to gain efficiency was considered,” Blasi said.

He said there was a slight tendency for some improvement in feed efficiency for the calves that had more bunk space, “but it was not significant after following these calves into a 90-day
double stock grazing system.”

Blasi said the study’s findings are important because they will help producers maximize the use of the bunks they already have available. New bunk lines and concrete aprons are expensive.

“We’re trying to make the most of what we have and help producers better estimate the number of animals they can (feed) if they are considering the use of limit feeding as an option for their operations,” Blasi said.

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Story by: 
Shelby Varner 
srvarner@ksu.edu

More information: 
Dale Blasi 
785-532-5427 
dblas@ksu.edu