



By Larry Reichenberger

Cornbelt cows

Expanding a cow/calf operation takes some new tactics

Cattlemen are rapidly rebuilding the nation's cow herd and when the job's done the finished product may look a little different than prior to the drought in 2011. Many industry experts believe more cows are headed to the Cornbelt—a shift that could leave corn and soybean growers reaching for a Stetson instead of a seed corn cap.

A recent study by Rabobank—a leading ag lender—drew attention to the changing geography of cow/calf production. “Cow numbers hit a low of 29 million in 2014 and we think it will now increase by 3.5 million head. New cow herds in the Cornbelt and Northern Plains will play a bigger role,” says senior analyst Don Close.

Close says the Cornbelt's surge in cow numbers is spurred by the need for crop producers in the region to diversify in response to low commodity prices. “Easy access to distillers grain from ethanol plants, the proximity to

feedlots and the rapidly expanding use of cover crops provide significant advantages to the region,” says Close.

Making cows fit. The limiting factors to cow/calf production in the Cornbelt are harsh weather and high land prices, but Close expects both to be minimized by growing interest in confinement and semi-confinement operation. Dorchester, Nebraska farmer Tyler Burkey is an example.

“In the last year we decided we wanted to double the size of our cow herd from 250 to 500 head. However, we didn't have enough pasture and high land prices made it impractical to buy more, so we decided on a semi-confinement strategy,” says Burkey.

Burkey's approach uses economical hoop buildings to shelter cows and newly weaned calves. “We split the cows into spring and fall-calving herds and rotate them in two of the buildings. Cows are brought in about 15 days before they calve and stay for about 120 days. Calves are then weaned and backgrounded in a third hoop building while the cows are moved out to graze on pastures, cover crops or corn stubble, depending on the season. We then clean the barn to prepare for the other half of the herd.”

The two calving buildings are 250 and 320-feet long and 46-feet wide. They feature a 15-foot concrete apron along the feed bunk with the remaining width in a bedding pack.

“We scrape manure off the apron a couple times a week and stockpile it, but only remove the bed pack between herds. This is the sole source of fertilizer for our corn,” says Burkey.

Other factors. Feeding the larger herd has also required innovation. Burkey is planting soybeans between corn rows to raise the protein content of silage and planting a rye cover crop behind corn to graze, hay or leave in swaths for winter grazing.

Burkey's facility was built by Central Confinement Service Ltd. of Columbus, Nebraska. “This approach is getting a lot of interest,” says sales representative Tony Romshek. “The buildings cost \$15-\$20 per sq. ft. (100 sq. ft. per cow/calf pair), but a rotation system like Tyler's cuts that in half.” ■

►**Left:** Innovative cropping ideas like interplanting soybeans in his corn and utilizing cover crops help Tyler Burkey feed his expanded herd.

►**Left inset:** Burkey says his semi-confined cow/calf system allows production efficiency and marketing flexibility while easing workload.

►**Below left:** Cells are plugged in seed discs to reduce the population of soybeans interplanted in silage corn. ►**Below:** Accu-Steel fabric covered buildings have allowed Burkey an economical way to double the size of his Cornbelt cow herd without having to purchase expensive land.

