



Building a sustainable beef herd

K-State cattle experts offer ways that cow-calf producers can incorporate practices for longevity
By Lisa Moser, K-State Research and Extension news service

In much the same way, many cow-calf operators are looking for ways to make their herds economically and environmentally sustainable, said the Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute experts speaking on a recent [Cattle Chat](#) podcast. Joining in the discussion was Bob Weaber, K-State beef cattle geneticist and head of the Eastern Kansas Research and Extension Center.

“By improving the efficiency of the cow herd we can make dramatic improvements in greenhouse gas emission,” Weaber said. “Producers that are focused on resource allocation and efficiency often capture energy in a way that yields more profitability for their operation.”

K-State beef cattle nutritionist Phillip Lancaster agreed with Weaber and added, “When we make the conversion of forage to calf more efficient, we are improving our sustainability and we are decreasing the amount of greenhouse gas emitted per unit of product.”

The experts agree that there are tools that cow-calf producers can leverage when looking to improve the stayability of cows in the herd.

One of those that has gained recent attention is a product recently approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that can be used to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, said K-State veterinarian Brian Lubbers.

“Now that there is a process for approval through the FDA, I expect there will be more non-genetic tools available in the near future for those who are focused on sustainability,” Lubbers said.

Along with that, Weaber said that some beef breed associations are using data to help producers meet their operational goals.

“A number of breed associations publish a sustained fertility or stayability EPD, but the reality is while those are important genetic evaluations, it’s a lowly heritable trait,” Weaber said.

He added: “We can make meaningful improvement genetically but it also means that management and environment play a disproportionately larger role in how long a cow lasts in the herd.”

Weaber said the cows need to match their environment in terms of mature cow size and metabolic efficiency. He also said that they need to be balanced in their lactation.

The other measure that producers need to account for, according to K-State veterinarian Bob Larson, is reproduction.

“By using the tools of breeding soundness exams, pregnancy checking and body condition evaluations, producers should have a herd with a high percentage of cows exposed to bulls that raise a healthy calf to weaning. And that is reproductive efficiency,” Larson said.