

A Whole Lotta Hoopla

So the participants of our Beef Issues Group, suggested we have a session on Confined beef cows and limit feeding. I made some contacts and was fortunate to get in touch with Jason Eickman and Rodney Parsons. They graciously agreed to let us come out and take some pictures and videos of their hoop barns. Will Boyer was going to bring his drone, and this was shaping up to be something really cool.

Did I say cool? Mother Nature did not play nice with us, and our scheduled days kept getting postponed, put off, and rescheduled. I got to the point, that it had to be done, in order to have something to show at the meeting. The days of filming were cold, in the 20's , but the wind chills I don't even want to know!

Both of these operations have cow/calves in hoop barns, different companies, different designs, different sizes. It was really quite interesting.

I'm always curious about animal behavior. Of course, both claim their animals are more docile. This makes sense, because of the daily interactions with humans and close up. The animals had plenty of room, they were doing quite well. They have to walk maybe 50 feet to feed and water, no mud, with nice bedding to lay down in. They did note that the calves will "rob" other mothers, so they might "jug" up the pair to get them to bond for a few days.

The cattle in the barns were sorted by age and body condition score. Age is important in limit feeding cows because of the younger cows typically are less aggressive than the older cows. When you sort by Body condition score, it enables you to offer different diets based on the goal of increasing, decreasing or maintaining body condition score.

Limit feeding makes bunk management easier, because all feed is consumed daily, eliminating the need to clean out bunks. Another benefit is that with less feed consumed and greater feed efficiency, cows produce less manure, which reduces feed and manure handling costs. Lower feed intake also means cows produce less heat, which helps minimize heat stress.

Some disadvantages are weather fluctuations, machine malfunctions and thin cows. Limit fed cows produce less heat, so consider increasing feed by 10% during the winter to provide enough feed. Of course, if you have feeding equipment breakdown, you need to have a plan B to have feed delivered in a timely manner.

Hoop barns may be a way to retain cows when pasture is depleted, increase feed

efficiency and reduce production costs. It still takes considerable land resources to raise the feeds and provide the bedding.

With winters like the current one, the hoop barns seem very attractive!!