

2002 Northwest Florida Beef & Forage Survey Summary

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INTRODUCTION

Developing priorities for Extension education programs and research is difficult to accomplish without a general understanding of clientele needs and current practices. By examining 25% of the clientele currently being served, long-range extension and research programs can be developed using the survey's data to corroborate perceptions of agents and advisory committee members and to uncover unidentified needs. Assessing the current level of management performance being utilized will provide agents a better understanding of which areas of management need to be stressed to improve profitability and efficiency for the region. This data will also serve as a benchmark, so agents and researchers can measure adoption rates of recommended practices and estimate impacts of the overall beef cattle educational program through future surveys. Producer perceptions of current information delivery methods will also provide guidance toward education program efforts in the future so that the clientele can be better served.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this survey is to describe the adoption rate of recommended management practices and to identify perceived research

and educational needs of beef cattle producers in the Panhandle of Florida. The main objectives of this study are as follows:

- 1) Develop a survey instrument that can be used to sample 25% of the beef cattle producer clientele currently subscribing to cattle mailing lists in the Northwest Florida Extension District.
- 2) Describe the types of beef cattle operations in the region and the use of recommended management practices known to increase efficiency and profitability of beef cattle operations. The questionnaire included seven major topics: attributes of the operation, reproduction, general management, herd health, nutrition, pasture management, and production information.
- 3) Compare the current level of management of producers in the Panhandle to the most recent surveys of producers in South Florida and the rest of the country with the use of data from similar surveys previously conducted to determine educational priorities for Extension educational programs in the future.
- 4) Determine the perceived research needs of cattle producers to improve the profitability, efficiency and resource utilization of their operations.

- 5) Determine the effectiveness of current Extension information delivery methods by examining perceptions and opinions of the clientele being served.

Survey Methods

Beef cattle producers from 12 Northwest Florida Counties were randomly selected from the County Extension Offices' mailing lists. Participating counties were from the Northwest Florida Extension District and included: Escambia, Gadsden, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Leon, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Taylor, Wakulla, Walton, and Washington. The mailing lists from these counties were randomly sampled with a total of 765 producers selected for this study. There were 411 surveys returned (a response rate of 54%). Since many Extension mailing lists were not specifically coded for beef cattle producers, only 264 respondents (64%) reported being involved as the owner or manager of a beef cattle operation in 2002.

Data Collection

Following is the outline of the mailing process:

1. Pre-survey postcard making producers aware of the process and alerting them to be on the look out for the survey.
2. Cover letter from corresponding agents along with the actual survey instrument.
3. Reminder post card sent to non-responders.
4. Second survey and cover letter sent to non-respondents.

In order to encourage a higher response rate, agents from each individual counties provided cover letters on their own letterhead to the producers in their counties. This was done because loyalty to the local agent was expected to generate a higher response rate than from a request by an unknown researcher in a nearby county. Pre-paid postage return envelopes were provided to encourage response.

In order to improve the content validity of the data, a panel of experts including Extension agents and specialists in the region evaluated the survey instrument. Jackson County producers that serve as advisory committee members were utilized to pilot test the questionnaire.

Presentation of the Results

This report summarizes each question as an average or percentage. Some questions allowed for multiple responses, so the percentages may not equal 100%. Where possible, the results of the 2002 Northwest Florida Survey (**blue**) were compared with the 1998 South Florida Beef/Forage Survey (**orange**) and U.S.D.A.'s Beef 97 Survey of the 26 major cow-calf states (**white**) to show the variation from operations of in the Panhandle. Several of the responses were also broken out by herd size.

Survey respondents that are presently involved in a beef cattle operation as the owner, manager, overseer or operator

Counties Surveyed	Producers in Survey	Total Operations*	% of Total in Survey	# of Beef Cows In Region**
Jefferson	16	126	13%	6000
Taylor	13	74	18%	3500
Leon	14	96	18%	2000
Gadsden	18	118	15%	4000
Wakulla	4	37	11%	1000
Jackson	49	393	12%	16000
Washington	41	164	25%	4000
Holmes	18	306	6%	7500
Walton	13	235	6%	5000
Okaloosa	31	141	22%	3000
Santa Rosa	29	198	15%	4000
Escambia	17	184	9%	3000
Totals	264***	2,072	13%	59,000

*Source: 1997 Ag Census Data

**Source: FDACS Inventory as of January 1, 2002

***One survey had the label removed so county was unknown.

Description of the Beef Cattle Operations

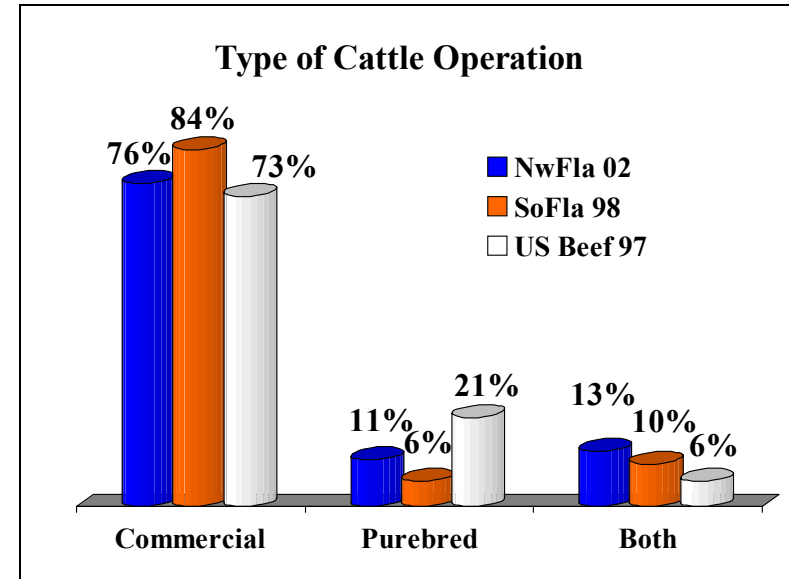
Quick Overview of the Typical Cow-calf Operation

Averages were calculated to describe the typical cow-calf operation in Northwest Florida. There was a wide variation amongst the individual operations for many of the following attributes.

- Average breeding herd size—71 head per herd compared to the Florida average of 58 hd/herd and the US average of 41 hd/herd. (Source: *USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service Report for January 1, 2002 Inventory*)
- Bull to cow ratio—1 bull for every 23 cows
- Average number of calves weaned—58 head per herd
- Average weaning weight and age—481 pounds at 7 months of age
- Average weaning percentage—81% of cows exposed to a bull weaned a calf
- Average pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed—390 pounds
- Average annual cow culling rate—9% or about 6 head/herd
- Average acreage used for cattle—153 acres per operation
- Land use averages—99 acres (65%) permanent pasture, 28 acres (18%) hay field, 41 acres (27%) of temporary grazing (10% acres multi-use)
- Rented land—Only 22% of the producers rented part or all of the land to use for their cattle operation, at an average price of \$25/acre
- Average stocking rate—2.2 acres per cow (all three land use types)
- Round Bales of hay fed per cow—3.3 Round Bales/cow
- Average hay production—9 Round bales/acre

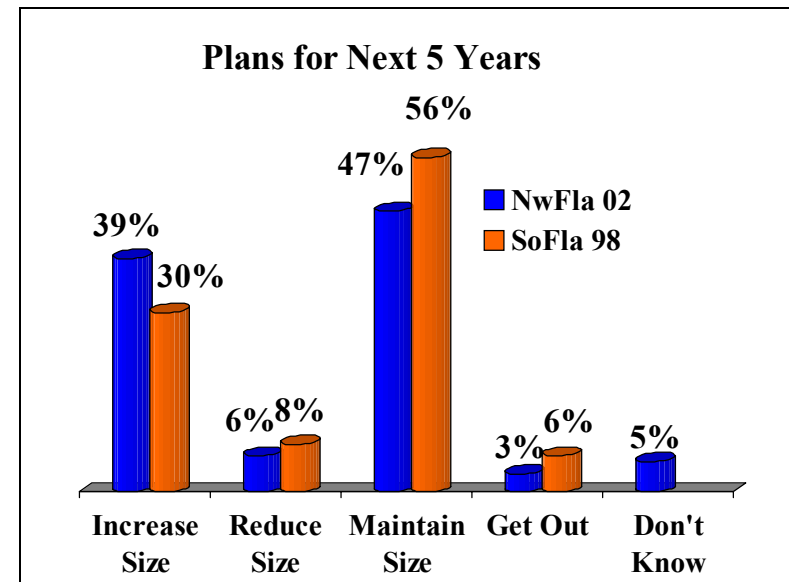
Type of Cattle Operation

The vast majority, 76%, of the cattle herds in the Panhandle Region are commercial cow-calf and only 24% of the herds being partially or solely involved in operations with registered or purebred cattle.



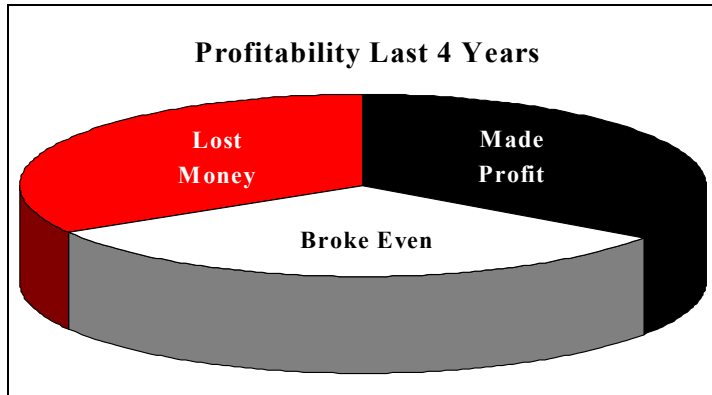
Plans for the Beef Operation Over the Next Five Years

Over the next five years, 86% of the producers surveyed indicated that they planned to maintain or increase the size of their herds.



*Don't Know was not a category in the South Florida Survey

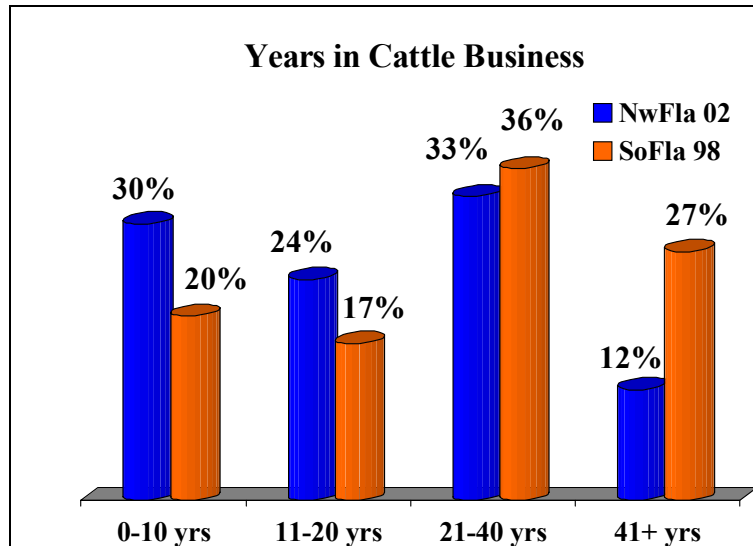
Profitability of Cattle Operations Over the Last Four Years



33.6%-Lost money 31.6%-Broke even 34.8%-Made a profit

Number of Years Owner/operator Has Been in the Cattle Business

Cattle producers in the Panhandle have a great deal of experience raising cattle, indicated by the fact that 70% of survey respondents have been in the cattle business for more than 10 years. The average number years in the cattle business for the group in this study was 23 years.



Percent of the Total Agricultural Income that Came from the Beef Cattle Operation

Cattle production fell mainly into two categories, either as the main agricultural operation or a small part of a much larger crop operation.

Percentage of Ag Income from Cattle	Percentage of Operations
1-25%	42
26-50%	14
51-75%	14
76-100%	31

The Main Reason for Raising Beef Cattle

Although income was the number one reason reported for having a cattle operation, 60% of the respondents cited other reasons that were more important than income.

Reason indicated	% of Operations
For profit or additional income	40%
Put non-crop land to use	32%
Hobby	17%
Use crop residues	4%
Greenbelt property tax exemption	4%
*Other	4%

*Other reasons listed--Pay for land as an investment, trees & timber, student teaching, to teach the younger generation, assist horse operation, for meat, or provide quality breeding stock to area cattlemen.

The Business Structure of Beef Operations

The majority of the cattle operations in this survey were family owned.

Business Structure	% of Operations
Family owned	90%
Partnership owned	5%
Corporation owned	2%
Owned by an individual not involved with day-to-day operation	2%

Employment Status of the Owner/operator

Ranchers in this survey were split with 53% having an off farm job and 47% either full time farmers or were retired from full time employment.

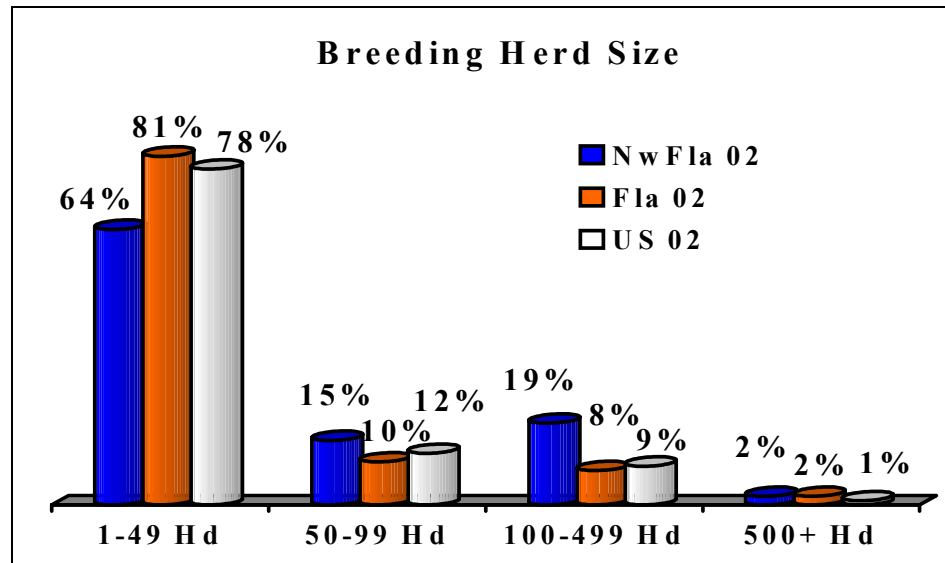
(Some of the respondents who said they did not have another job were retired from off farm employment. Future surveys need to break this information out separately)

If they had an off-farm job, the job was usually full-time (91%). Only 9 % of those with an off-farm job worked part-time.

Reproduction

Number of Breeding Females Exposed to a Bull in the 2001-2002 Breeding Season

The total number of breeding females at the operations in this study was 17,243 (represents 29% of breeding beef cows in the region). The average number of breeding females was 71 head per herd and the median number of breeding females was 31 head per herd. Nearly four-fifths (79%) of the herds represented in this study had less than 100 head in the breeding herd. In comparison, the 1998 South Florida study reported the average herd size was 704 breeding females per operation.



**Florida 02 and US 02 figures from USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service January 1, 2002 report*

From the Cows and Heifers Exposed to a Bull during the 2001-2002 Breeding Season, the Number of Calves Weaned in 2002

The total number of calves weaned was 13,608. The average number of calves weaned was 58 calves per herd. Overall, the weaned calf crop was 81%. Note: The calculated weaning percentage based on total calves weaned divided by the total number of breeding females exposed to a bull.

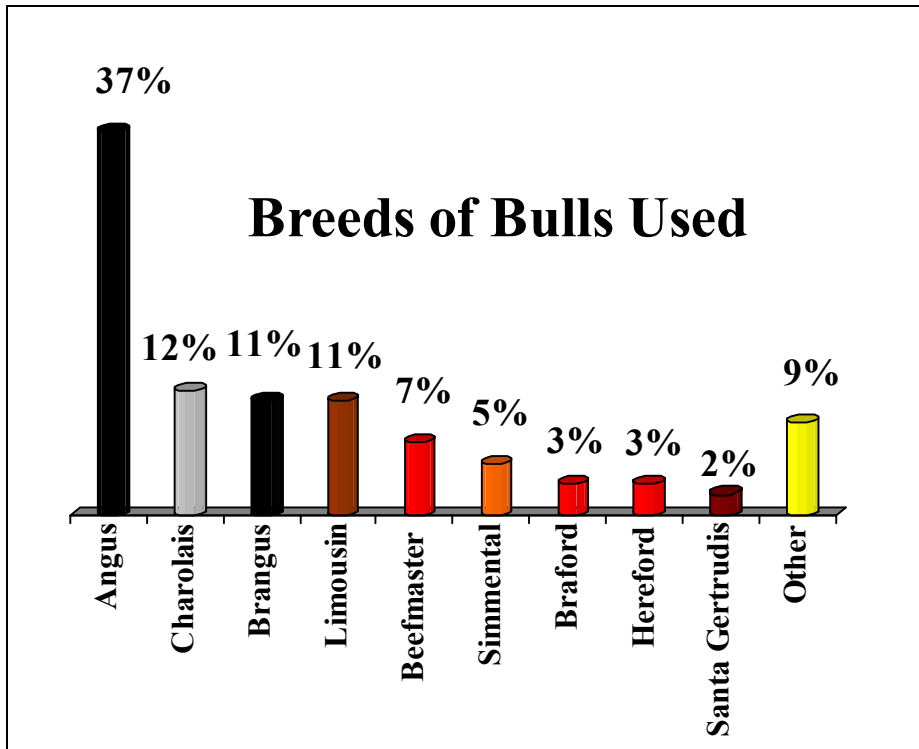
The Number of Bulls Used in the 2001-2002 Breeding Season.

Total number of bulls used by the ranches was 754. On average, one bull was used for every 23 cows and sired an average of almost 19 calves.

Breeds of Bulls

There were 23 different breeds of bulls used, as well as some composite and crossbred bulls. Even though there was a wide variety of breed types of bulls utilized, 58% of the operations relied on only one breed

of bull in their herds, 28% used two breeds, 10% three breeds and 4% four breeds of bulls. Angus bulls were used three times as often as any other breed.



Frequency of bull breeding soundness exams (semen test etc.)

BSE Exam Frequency	Every Year	Every 2-3 Years	Purchase and 8+ Yrs	Only at Purchase	Never	Other
NwFla 02	12	7	4	29	46	*1
SoFla 98	38	17	**NA	22	21	**NA

**Operations that raised their own bulls and had them checked for breeding soundness prior to use for breeding.*

***NA-question not asked in this study.*

Testing for Trichomoniasis (Trich)

Trichomoniasis or Trich is a reproductive disease known to be a problem in Florida. The infectious organism is carried by bulls in their sheath. Only 7% of the Northwest Florida producers tested their breeding bulls for trichomoniasis, where as 25% of the producers in the 1998 South Florida study and 5% of the producers in the US Beef 97 study had their bulls tested for this disease.

Importance of Criteria for Selecting Bulls (1=not important to 4=very important)

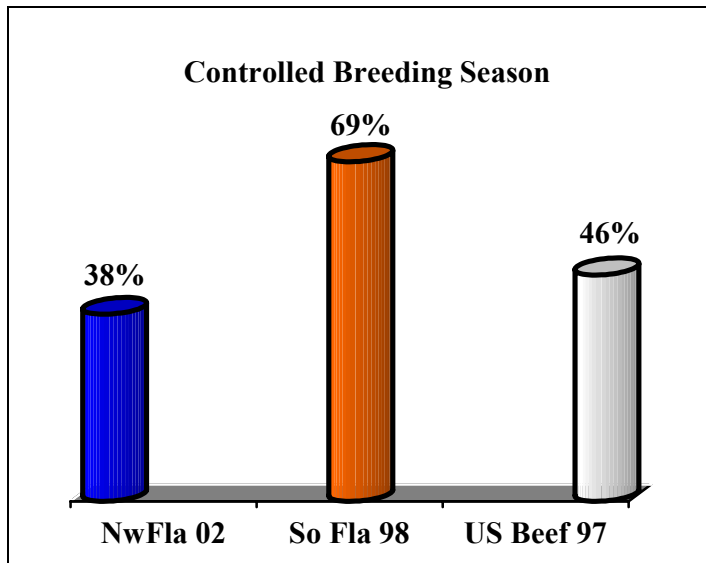
All responses were added up for a total score then divide by the number of respondents to calculate an average score.

Ranking	Selection Criteria	Total Score	Average Score
1	Visual Conformation	743	3.1
2	Birth Weight EPD's	710	2.9
3	Weaning Weight EPD's	679	2.8
4	Price	659	2.7
5	Yearling Weight EPD's	647	2.7
6	Scrotal Circumference	601	2.5
7	Pedigree	596	2.5
8	Individual Weights	583	2.4
9	Carcass Information	578	2.3
10	Bull Test Performance	558	2.0
11	Herd Ratio	494	2.0
12	Other Criteria	37	**

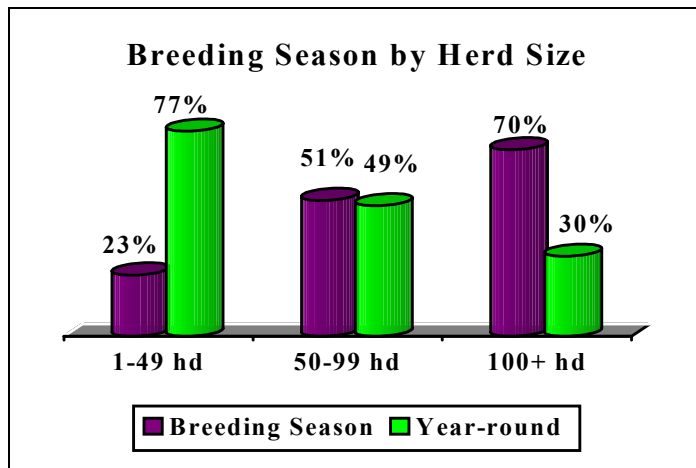
**4.5% listed an additional criterion. The other criteria indicated were milk EPD's, disposition or temperament, and buying from an honest breeder.

Percentage of Operations with a Controlled Breeding Season

Only 38% of the ranchers that responded utilized a controlled breeding season, which was significantly lower than other regions. This one management practice affects the use of many other practices measured.



However, if you evaluate the Northwest Florida Study by herd size, the majority of the larger operations are utilizing a controlled breeding season in the 2002 Northwest Florida Study.



Length of the Controlled Breeding Season

Of the respondents who indicated they utilized a controlled breeding season, 78% turned the bulls out for 4 months or less.

Length of breeding season	45-60 days	61-90 days	91-120 days	121-180 days	181+ days
% of operations	9	38	31	19	2

Beginning and Ending Months of the 2001-2002 Breeding Season.

Of the cattle producers who indicated the use of a controlled breeding season, 62% put their bulls into the herd to begin the calving season in the fall months (September-November) and 31% in the winter months (December-February). This is a contrast to the US study where 64% of producers bred for spring calving.

Season Began	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
% NwFla	29	19	17	10	4	2	0	2	2	0	3	14
% US 97	4.8	4.3	4.6	11.5	26.6	28.7	8.8	0.5	0.9	1.5	2.6	5.2

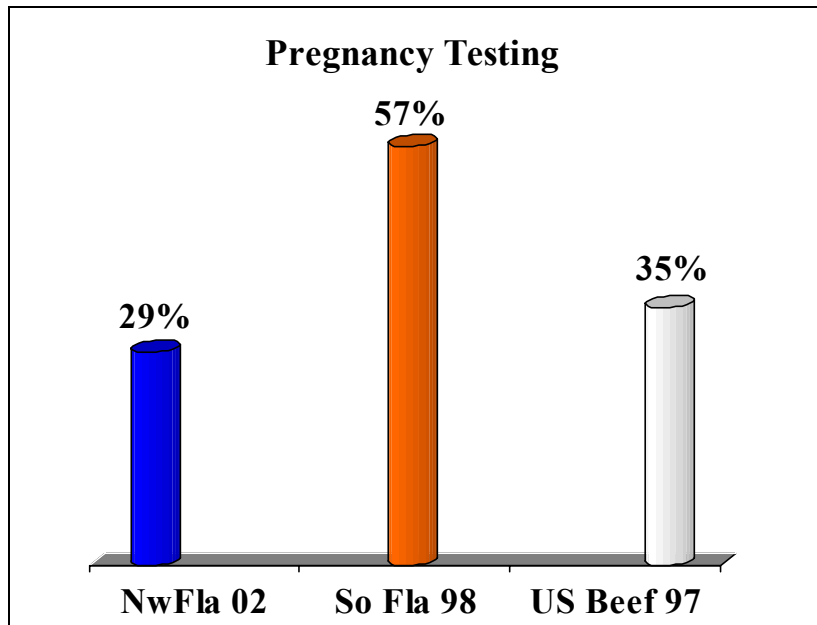
Season Ended	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
% NwFla	2	6	18	16	18	16	9	11	3	1	1	2

Use of artificial insemination (A.I.)

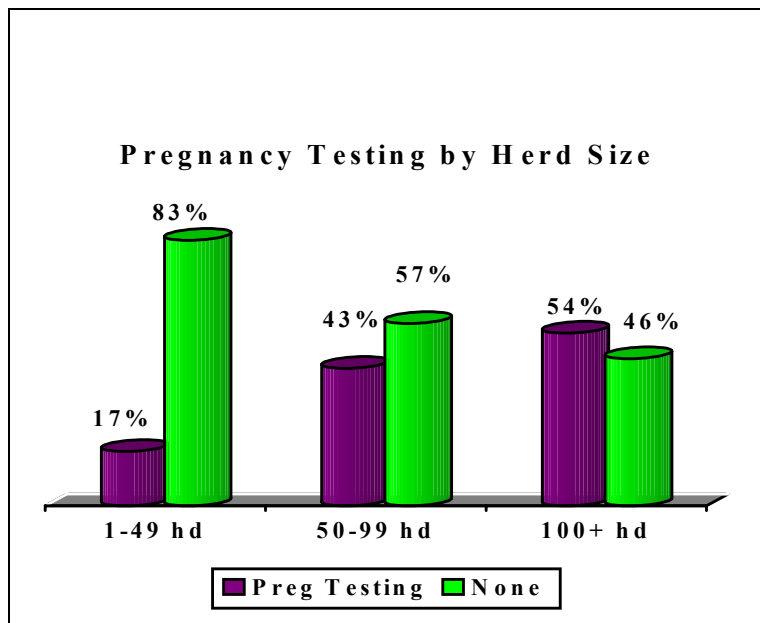
Artificial insemination allows producers to utilize the semen for the best bulls available nationwide for specific traits. The producers represented in this study utilized artificial insemination on 15% of the cattle operations. This was significantly higher than the producers in the South Florida 98 study at only 4% and slightly higher than the US Beef 97 survey, where 13% of the operations surveyed utilized A.I.

Use of pregnancy testing

Pregnancy testing is a management tool used to separate cattle that will not calve during the production year. The following table represents the percentage of operations that palpated at least part of their herd annually.



This figure is somewhat different when herd size is also taken into consideration in the 02 Northwest Florida Study.



Pregnancy Rates

Of the operations that had cattle checked for pregnancy, percentage rates ranged from 87% for first calf cows to 92% for replacement heifers and mature cows. For those operations that did not have records for each cattle group separately, they reported a herd pregnancy rate of 92%. These were significantly higher than in South Florida.

Groups of Cattle	Replacement Heifers	First Calf Cows	Mature Cows
NwFla 02	92%	87%	92%
SoFL 98	81%	77%	84%

Technicians Used for Pregnancy Testing

Veterinarians and ranch owners or employees do the majority of the pregnancy testing. Some operations utilized more than one type of technician. Other technicians reported for pregnancy testing were A.I. suppliers or technicians and livestock auction market personnel.

Type of Technician	Owner/Employee	Veterinarian	Other
NwFla 02	48%	58%	12%
SoFla 98	46%	55%	7%

Use of Pregnancy Status for Culling of Breeding Females

Of the operations that pregnancy tested cattle, 91% used the information to make culling decisions.

Percentage of Cows Culled

The average culling rate for the producers in the Northwest Florida study was 9% (about 6 cows per herd), which was similar in the South Florida survey.

Source of Replacement Females

The majority of producers, 86% raise their own replacement heifers while 14% only purchased their replacements. Some producers utilize both raised and purchased their replacements.

Type of Replacement	Raised Heifers	Purchased Open Heifers	Purchased Bred Heifers	Purchased Open Cows	Purchased Bred Cows
NwFla 02	86%	24%	24%	11%	36%
So Fla 98	90%	19%	24%	*NA	*NA
US 97	88%	**12%		**24%	

*The South Florida 98 study did not ask about purchasing mature cows.

**The US Beef 97 study did not separate replacement heifers or cows by pregnancy status.

Heifer Replacement Breeding Schedule

Eighty percent of Northwest Florida cattle producers exposed their heifers to be bred at 15 months so they would calve at two years of age.

Age of Heifers at Calving	2 Year Old Heifers	3 Year Old Heifers	2 or 3 Year Old Heifers*
NwFla 02	56%	18%	25%
SoFla 98	40%	43%	13%

*2-year-old heifers get a second chance to be bred

Estimated Average Weight of Heifers at Time of Breeding

The overall average weight of heifers at the beginning of the breeding season for all operations was 792 pounds, compared to 731 pounds in the 1998 South Florida Study.

Percentage of Operations that Exposed Their Heifers to be Bred Prior to the Mature Herd Breeding Season

Of the operations that raised their own replacement heifers, 41% were exposed to a bull for breeding ahead of the mature cowherd in this study compared to 51% in the 1998 South Florida study. This practice allows the heifers more recovery time after calving to rebreed for the following year.

Management of Replacement Heifers in a Separate Herd

Heifers maintained in separate herds from the mature cow herd can be managed more intensively for nutrition and reproduction. In this study, 53% of producers kept their heifers separate while 89% of the producers in the South Florida study used this management practice.

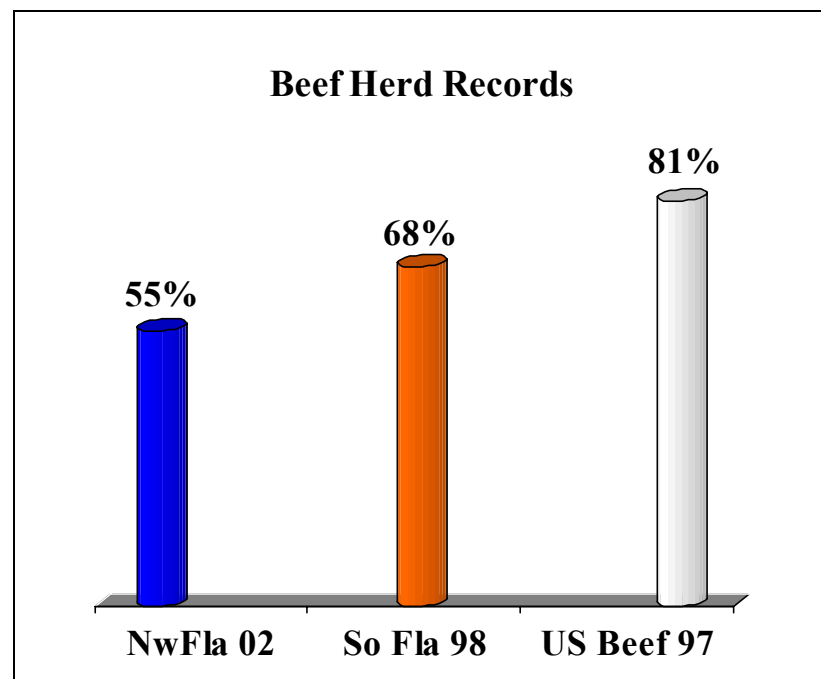
General Management

Percentage of Operations Keeping Individual Animal Records

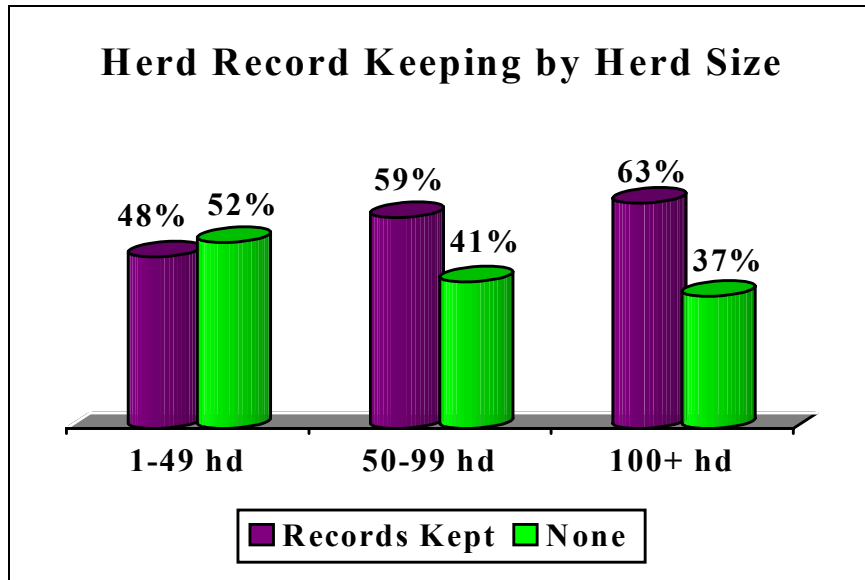
Tracking the performance of individual animals on a ranch is very helpful in making selection and culling decisions. In order to track individual animals however, each animal must be identified. There were only 45% of the operations in this study who kept individual animal records, as opposed to 64% in the South Florida 98 study and 53% in the US Beef 97 study.

Percentage of Operations that Kept Whole Herd Records

Even more important than the use individual animal records, is the use of herd records. Herd data, both financial and production are essential to determining the success or failure of the business and for making future decisions.



As with other practices, the utilization of herd record keeping varied by herd size in the 02 Northwest Florida Study.



Type of Herd Records Kept

Producers were asked which type of herd records were kept. A slight majority (51%) of the producers who kept herd records, kept both financial and production records.

Type of Herd Records Kept	Financial	Production	Both
Nw Fla 02	38%	11%	51%
So Fla 98	43%	17%	40%

Use of Herd Records for Business Analysis

Records alone are not valuable without some kind of analysis. Of the operations that said that they kept records, 75% used the data for some type of business analysis or evaluation. This is considerably higher than the South Florida study, where only 50% of the operations used their records for some type of business analysis.

Use of Records to Select or Cull Cattle

Of the panhandle indicated that they kept records, 67% indicated that they used the data to select or cull cattle. Only 45% reported doing so in the 1998 South Florida study.

Marketing

Average Age and Weight of Calves at Weaning

The average age and weight of calves at weaning was similar to the responses in other surveys.

Weaned Calves	Average Age in Months	Average Weight in Pounds
NwFla 02	7	481
SoFla 98	8	458
US 97	7	497

Pounds of calf weaned per cow

Pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed are a common measure of herd performance for comparison from herd to herd and year to year. The average pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed were 390 pounds.

Average Age and Weight of Calves Sold if after Weaning

If calves were sold after weaning, the average age was 12 months with and average weight of 749 pounds. Because many of the registered operations sold calves much older and heavier, the answers for this question had considerable variation.

Marketing Method for the Sale of Calves

Local auction markets are still the primary marketing method for the large majority (92%) of producers in the Panhandle of Florida.

Marketing Method	% NwFla 02	% SoFla 98	% US 97
Auction Market	92	87	85
Order Buyer	13	25	10
Private Treaty	16	28	10
Retained Ownership	10	12	1
Board Sale	2	1	NA
Alliance/Co-op	2	2	NA
Internet Auction	1	NA	NA
Video Auction	5	11	1
Special Cattle Sale	12	NA	1
Other	7	NA	2

NA—Category not provided in study.

Many producers relied on more than one marketing method. Other marketing methods reported in Northwest Florida included the sale of 4-H and FFA club steers and heifers and selling finished animals for freezer beef.

Management Practices to Enhance the Health and Value of Weaned Calves Marketed

The number one practice used by producers in this study to improve the value of the calves they sold was deworming (72%), followed by castration (59%) and black leg or clostridial vaccination (48%).

Management Practice	NwFla 02	SoFla 98	US 97
Deworm	72	77	73
Castrate	59	82	71
7-8 way Blackleg	48	*NA	69
Polled Bulls (Dehorn genetically)	35	37	38
Taught to eat from bunk	26	32	*NA
Dehorn physically	25	51	61
Creep feed	24	*NA	29
Sort by sex and weight	23	*NA	*NA
Growth Implant	17	49	14
Shipping fever shots twice	15	**45	12
Shipping fever shots once	11		23
None	11	*NA	*NA

*NA—Category not include in study

**South Florida study did not separate one round of vaccines or two

Herd Health

External Parasite Control for the Herd

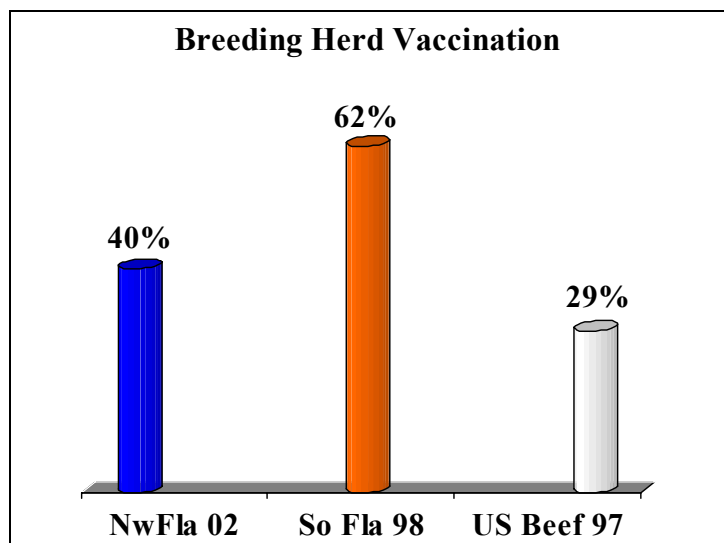
Horn flies, lice, grubs and other external parasites may reduce the performance of cattle in the herd. Over 95% of the producers in Northwest Florida controlled external parasites compared to 99% in South Florida, and only 81% in USDA's 26 state study. Below were the types of external parasite control products used:

Product Type	Ear Tag	Back Rubber	Pour On	Dust Bag	Spray	Feed/Mineral
NwFla 02	18%	26%	81%	18%	53%	34%
SoFla 98	28%	16%	88%	12%	52%	4%
US 97	31%	*61%				7%

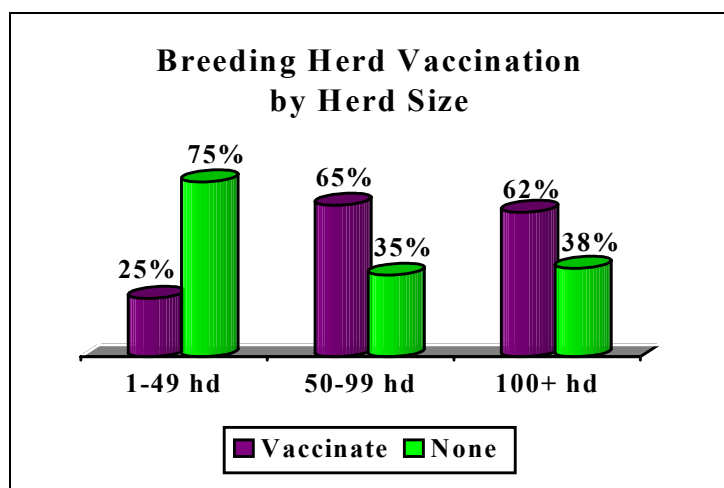
*US Beef 97 study combined all topical treatments as one category.

Vaccination of the Breeding Herd

The breeding herd can be vaccinated against reproductive and other infectious diseases that can drastically affect herd performance. The majority of the operations represented by this study, 60% did not vaccinate their breeding herd for protection from any diseases.



The medium sized and larger cattle operations vaccinated their herds more frequently, however in the 2002 Northwest Florida Study.



Of the producers who vaccinate their breeding herd, the types of vaccines used:

Vaccine	NwFla 02	SoFla 98	US Beef 97
Vibrio/Lepto	67%	62%	29%
Hemophilus	26%	18%	7%
Trich	13%	20%	1%
Pinkeye	26%	9%	5%
Calf Scours	27%	10%	5%
Clostridium	62%	66%	14%
IBR, BVD, PI3, & BRSV	55%	48%	18%
Other	3%	*NA	*NA

*NA—Category not included in other studies.

Internal Parasite Control for the Herd

Internal parasites can reduce the performance of the breeding herd. The vast majority operations represented in this study (91%) wormed their herds each year as compared to 94% in the South Florida study and 73% in the US Beef 97 study of 26 states. The types of products used are listed below:

Product Type	NwFla 02	SoFla 98
Injectable	46%	67%
Paste	8%	16%
Pour On	74%	73%
Feed/Mineral	36%	8%
Drench	5%	38%
Other	0%	2%

Treatment for Liver Flukes

Liver flukes can cause both a reduction in live animal performance and in the value of the carcass from condemned livers. Liver flukes are a more serious problem in lower, wet areas, which are more common in South Florida. Only 30% of the producers in the Northwest Florida survey treated for liver flukes, as compared to 65% in the South Florida producers.

Feeding the Herd

Body Condition Scoring (BCS) to Determine Supplement Use

Body condition scoring is a fairly simple method of monitoring the fat cover on cows in the breeding herd. By maintaining an adequate cover of fat, producers can ensure that cattle have enough nutrition to constantly perform. This practice was used by 30% of the producers in Northwest Florida, as compared to 69% in South Florida.

Months When Winter Supplement Is Fed

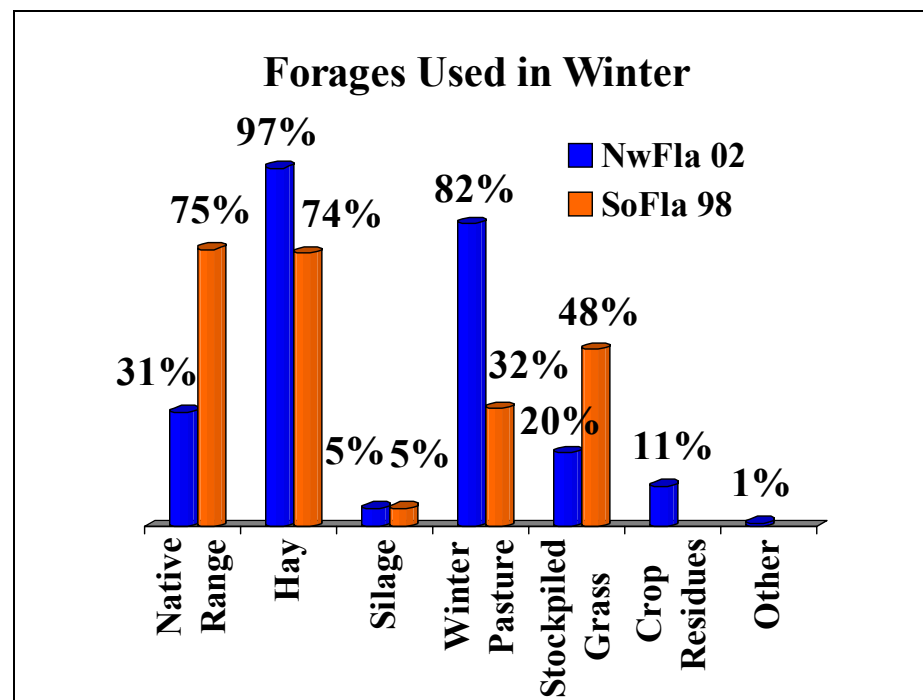
Producers varied somewhat with their winter supplementation program, but as a group the average was to start feeding supplement at the end of October and stop feeding supplement at the end of March. As would be expected, producers in Northwest Florida fed supplement earlier and longer on average than producers in South Florida.

Month to start supplementation	NwFla 02	SoFla 98
September	6%	3%
October	35%	13%
November	44%	28%
December	11%	32%
January	0%	11%
All Year	4%	7%

Month to stop supplementation	NwFla 02	SoFla 98
December	2%	
January	2%	
February	8%	4%
March	28%	46%
April	44%	30%
May	14%	10%
June	1%	3%

Types of Forage Fed during the Winter Months

Hay is an important forage source for the winter months in all regions of Florida; however, Northwest Florida producers were more reliant on winter annual forages while South Florida producers were more reliant on native range to supplement hay.



Winter Feed Supplements Used

Northwest Florida producers utilized a variety of supplement feeds with the majority using some type of convenient self-limiting feed such as molasses or protein blocks.

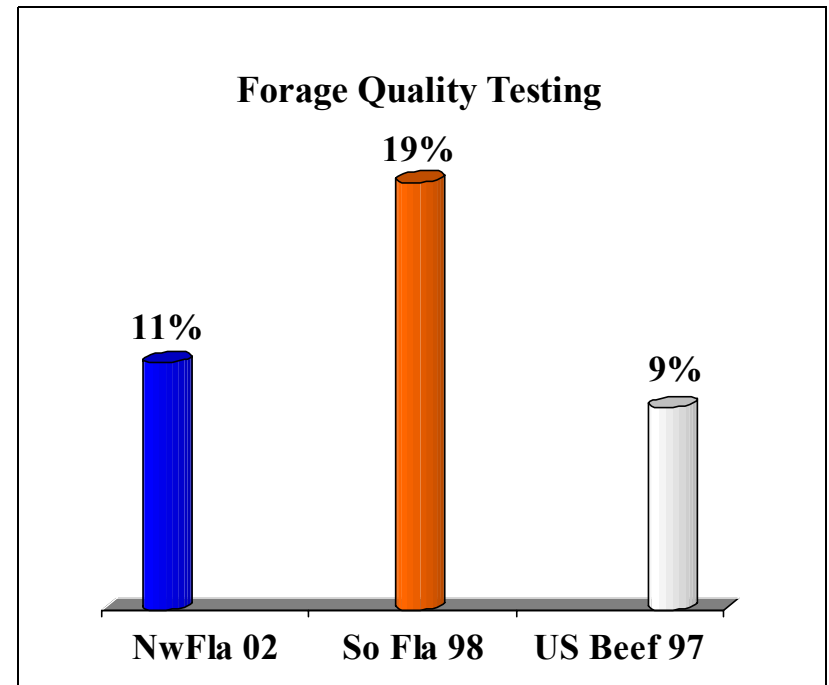
Supplement Feed	% NwFla 02	% SoFla 98
Molasses feeds	49	75
Protein blocks	48	28
Salt/protein mix	37	28
Protein mineral	33	31
Range cubes	31	29
Purchased feeds	25	11
Cotton seed	25	**NA
Grain	19	**NA
Gin trash	6	**NA
Soybean hulls	6	1
Poultry litter	2	1
Citrus pulp	2	20
Wheat mids	1	0
Other	0	9
None	4	2

*Many producers utilized multiple types of supplement feeds.

**NA—Category not provided in this study.

Use of Forage Analysis

Forage quality testing for nutritional value can be very helpful to ensure adequate supplement is fed during the winter. In the North Florida Study, 11% of the producers had their forages tested.



Pastures and Forages

Total Acres Used for Forage for the Cattle Operation

Total acreage used for grazing or stored forages by the 253 producers who reported acreage was 38,725 for an operation average of 153 acres. The average stocking rate was 2.2 acres per cow. This compares to 3.7 acres per cow in the 1998 South Florida study.

Acreage Rented for Cattle Production

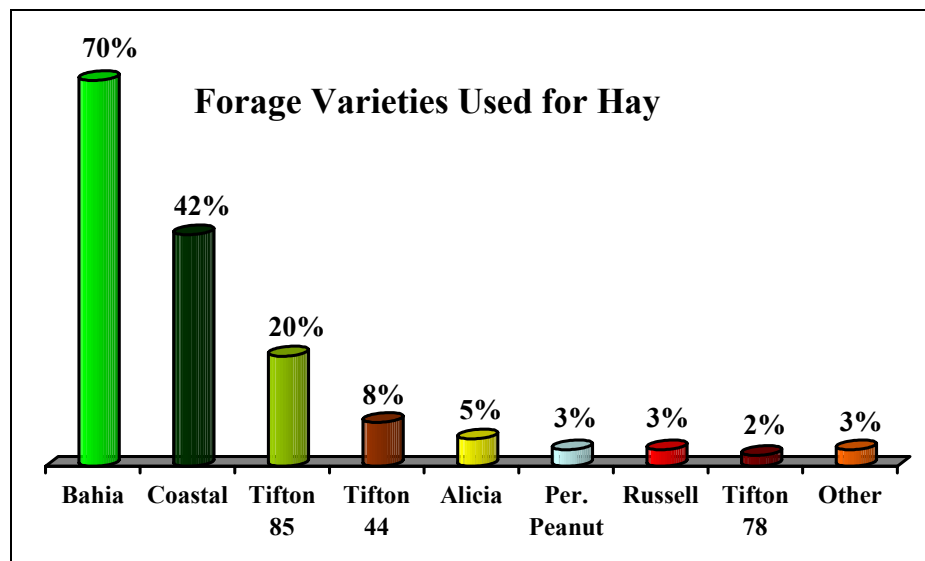
Only 22% of the producers rented part or all of the land for their cattle operation for an average price of \$25/acre. The rented acreage was only 14% of the total acreage.

Acreage and Forage Varieties Used for Permanent Pastures

Of the total acreage that was reported, 65% was used for permanent pastures for an operation average of 99 acres. The majority of the producers in this study, 96% used bahia in part of all of their pastures while only 40% used Bermuda grasses.

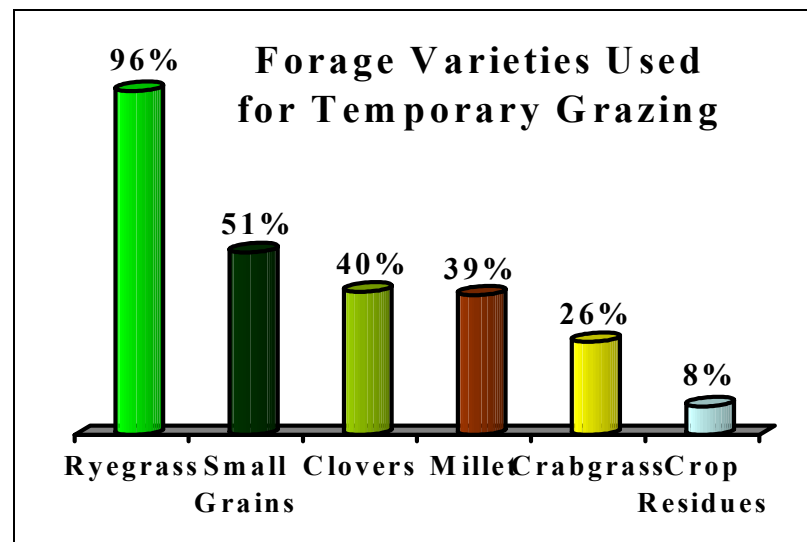
Acreage and Forage Varieties Used for Hay

Of the total acreage that was reported, 18% was used for hay production for an operational average of 27 acres. Bahia is the most widely used forage variety for hay in the region with 70% of the producers making at least part of their hay from this variety.



Acreage and Forage Varieties Used for Temporary Grazing

Of the total acreage that was reported, 27% was used for temporary grazing for an operational average of 41 acres. Ryegrass is the most widely used forage variety for temporary grazing in the region with 96% of the operations listing as at least one of the varieties utilized for this practice.



Total Round Bales of Hay Fed and Grown Per Year

Producers fed an average of 231 round bales of hay per year for an average of 3.3 rolls per cow. Of those who fed hay, 76% grew at least part of the hay they fed and, of the producers who grew hay, 39% grew more hay than they actually needed to provide additional income. On average, operations produced slightly more than 9 round bales of hay per acre in 2002.

Grazing Management System

Producers were asked how they grazed their pastures. The majority, 72%, moved cattle on some type of rotational system. This was very similar to the 79% of producers utilizing some form of rotational grazing in the South Florida 1998 study.

Grazing System	% of Operations
Move cattle on a time schedule	4%
Move cows on a set rotation based on forage growth	28%
Move cows to best available forage (no set rotation)	40%
Continuous grazing (leave gates open)	28%

Fertilization of Permanent Pastures

The vast majority of producers, 89%, fertilize their permanent pastures 1 or more times annually.

Frequency of Fertilization	% of Operations
3 or more times per year	2%
2 times per year	46%
Once annually	41%
Every other Year	5%
Every third year	3%
*Other	3%

*Other answers given were: as needed and never.

Fertilization of Hay Fields

Fertilization of hay fields varied more from operation to operation, however 82% fertilized at least twice annually.

Frequency of Fertilization	% of Operations
Spring only (once)	18%
2 times per year	29%
Spring and after each cutting	46%
Spring and every other cutting	7%
*Other	2%

*Other answers given were: 3 or 4 times per year

Fertilization of Temporary Pastures

Eighty eight percent of the producers fertilized their temporary pastures no more than twice.

Frequency of Fertilization	% of Operations
Once	47%
Twice	41%
After planting and after each grazing	10%
As needed	2%

Fertilization Decision-making

Almost half, 48% of the producers in this study relied on commercial or University of Florida soil tests for making fertilization decisions, as compared to only 21% in the South Florida 98 study.

Information Source	% of Operations
Previous experience	36%
Fertilizer dealer recommendations	15%
Commercial soil test	30%
University of Florida soil test	18%
Cost or money available basis	1%

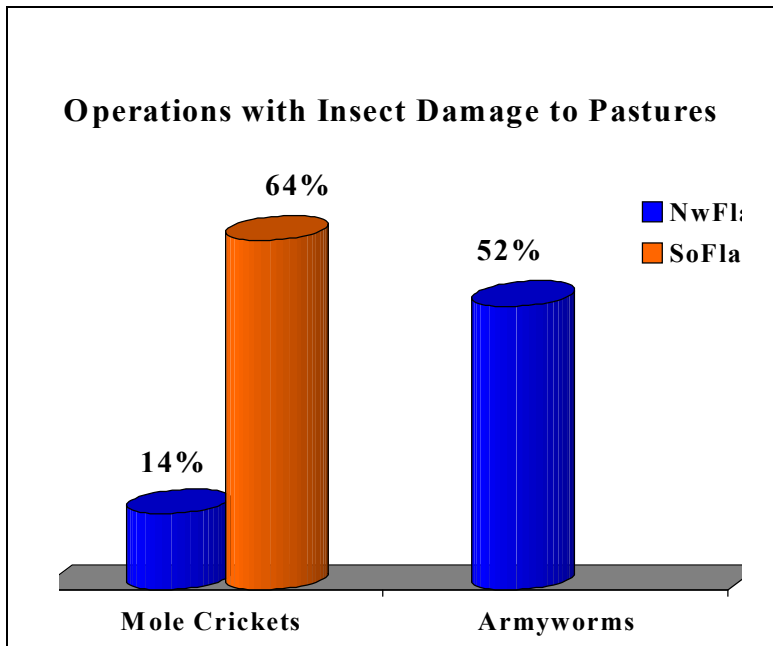
Use of Organic Waste for Fertilizer

Organic waste is not widely used for pasture fertilizer. Only 12% of the operations in this study, and 11% in the South Florida 98 study rely on these types of materials. Of those operations that used organic waste, the vast majority, 87% use poultry litter.

Type of Organic Fertilizer	% of Operations
Liquid sludge	6%
Dry sludge	10%
Poultry litter	87%
Effluent (spray fields)	6%

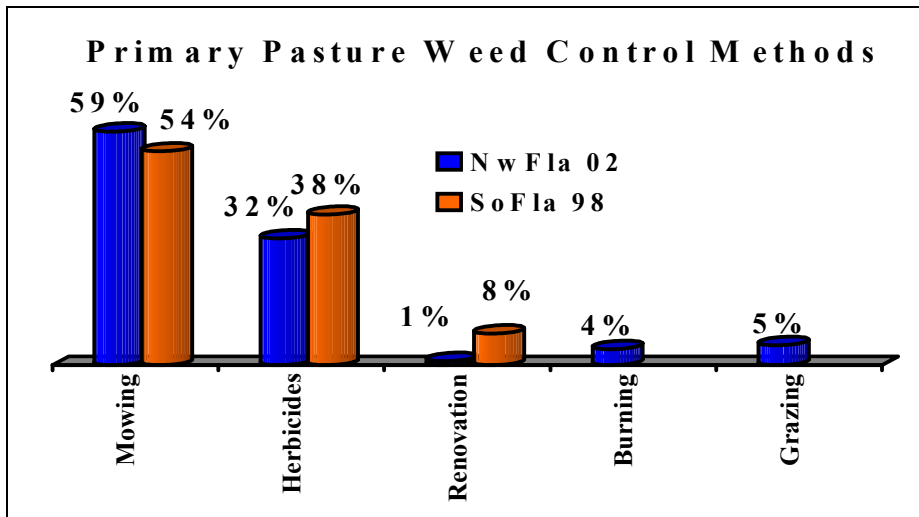
Mole Cricket and Armyworm Damage to Pastures

More operations, 52% reported damaged pastures due to armyworms, than from mole crickets, 14%. Armyworms also damaged more acres on average per operation, 60 acres, than mole crickets, 27 acres. In the South Florida 98 study, 64% of the producers reported mole cricket damage to an average of 289 acres per operation. Armyworm damage was not assessed in the South Florida study.



Primary Methods for Pasture Weed Control

Mowing was the primary method used for weed control in both the Northwest 02 and South Florida 98 studies.



Problem Pasture Weeds

Producers were asked to rate a list of pasture weeds on a scale of 0=Not a Problem to 3=Serious Problem. Based on these ratings, Dogfennel was the most common problem weed. Thirty percent of the operations had a moderate to serious problem with dogfennel and pigweed.

Ranking	Weed Name	Total Score	Operations with Moderate Problem	Operations with Serious Problem
1	Dogfennel	241	23%	7%
2	Pigweed (careless)	228	24%	6%
3	Blackberry (briars)	221	17%	4%
4	Smutgrass	210	18%	9%
5	Common Bermuda	198	19%	6%
6	Wild Radish (wild mustard)	185	19%	4%
7	Coffeeweed	184	12%	6%
8	Teaweed (ironweed)	141	10%	3%
9	Horesnettle	132	10%	3%
10	Sandspur	115	8%	2%
11	Tropical Soda Apple	81	4%	3%
12	Crotalaria	57	4%	0%
13	Prickly Pear	53	3%	0%
14	Vasseygrass	39	2%	2%
15	Horseweed (mare's tail)	29	2%	0%

Other problem weeds identified by producers were: centipede grass, mimosa, thistle, yaupon, goat head and crowsfoot grass.

Florida Cattlemen's Association's Water Quality Best Management Practices (BMPs)

Less than a third, 31% of the producers surveyed said that they were familiar with the Florida Cattlemen's Association BMPs. Of this group of producers who knew about BMPs, 26% had developed a ranch conservation plan to actually implement the BMPs. Overall, only 8% of the whole study group had actually developed a plan to implement BMPs in their operations.

Production Information

Sources for Cattle and Forage Production Information

Respondents were asked to rank the people they rely on for information on a scale of 0=Never Use to 4=Always Use. Producers valued the opinions and ideas of other producers, but they also value the information provided by County Extension Agents, local farm supply dealers, veterinarians and University Specialists.

Ranking	Type of People	Total Score	% of Producers Usually Use	% of Producers Always Use
1	Other cattle producers	531	30	10
2	County extension agent	500	29	14
3	Local farm & feed supply dealers	420	23	4
4	Veterinarian	411	20	6
5	University specialists	295	10	5
6	Close relatives who produce cattle	253	13	4
7	Regional company sales representative	208	5	1
8	NRCS agent	173	5	3
9	Agriculture teacher	80	1	1
10	Private Consultant	64	2	1

Methods Used to Obtain Information on Beef Cattle Production Practices or Management Problems

Printed information was cited as the method most often used for information such as cattle or farm magazines, Extension newsletters and fact sheets, while observation of other ranchers and consultations with County Agents were also rated fairly high.

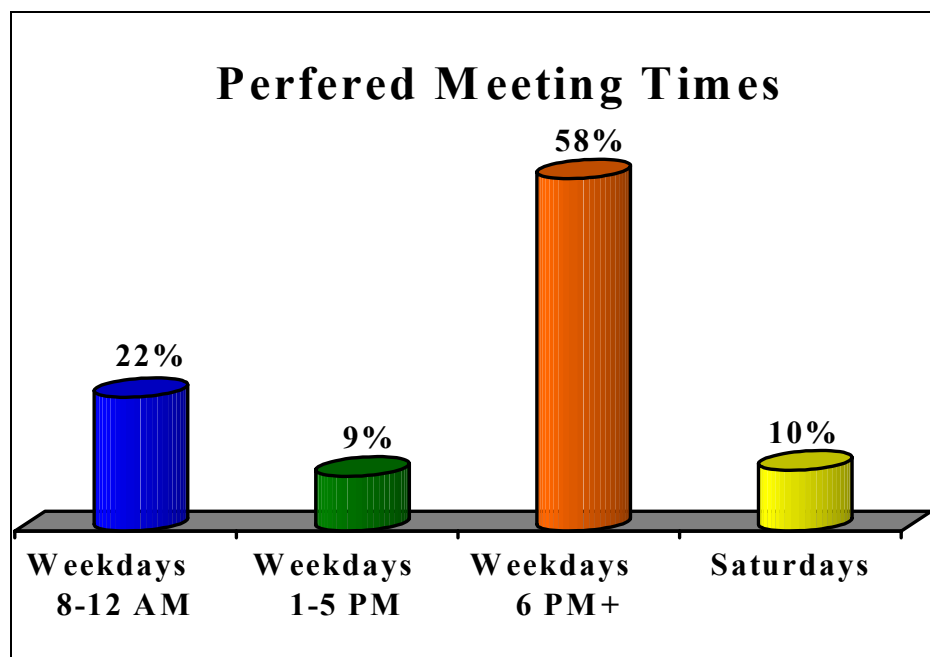
Ranking	Channels of Information	Total Score	% of Producers Usually Use	% of Producers Always Use
1	Cattle or Farm Magazines	576	31	20
2	County Extension Newsletters	563	34	16
3	Extension Bulletins	524	32	11
4	Observation of other ranchers	503	29	11
5	One-on-one consultation with County agent (phone, office or farm)	361	21	7
6	Newspaper	357	17	5
7	Beef Cattle Field Days	294	11	7
8	Farm Demonstrations	261	12	3
9	Research Center Demos	252	11	4
10	Television	237	5	5
11	Cattlemen's Tours	218	10	2
12	Radio shows	176	6	1
13	NW Fla. Beef Conference	163	8	1
14	University web sites	128	4	1
15	Commercial web sites	124	5	1
16	County Extension Web Site	111	3	1

Use of Extension information in the last 12 months

One hundred and fifty of the producers surveyed (59%) had attended an Extension program or received information from UF Extension on beef cattle or forages in 2002. Of these who received information from Extension, 50% rated the information as Very Good, 41% Good and only 3% rated it Fair with no ratings of Poor or Very Poor.

Preferred times to schedule educational programs.

The majority of the producers surveyed, 58% indicated that they preferred educational programs be scheduled on weeknights after 6 PM.



Biggest Challenges, Problems or Needs to be addressed by UF/IFAS Extension Educational Programs or Research

Producer comments were summarized as follows:

Challenges:

Cattle producers face a number of challenges, but the most noted was the ability to make a profit, the need to reduce costs, or increase the

price received for calves sold. Other challenges noted were: attracting younger producers into the business, and educating the public about the value of agriculture to the economy and environment in the region.

Problems:

Limited marketing alternatives (mentioned most frequently), pasture insects—primarily fire ants and armyworms, weed control—such as smutgrass and centipede grass, dealing with drought, and sources of economical feed supplements were all problems brought up that producers in the region face.

Educational Needs:

A wide array of requests was made for training. Subjects ranged from herd health, nutrition and alternative feeds, pasture and animal pest control, forage selection and management, breeds and breeding systems, marketing including the potential of cooperatives, improving profitability, and record keeping.

Research Needs:

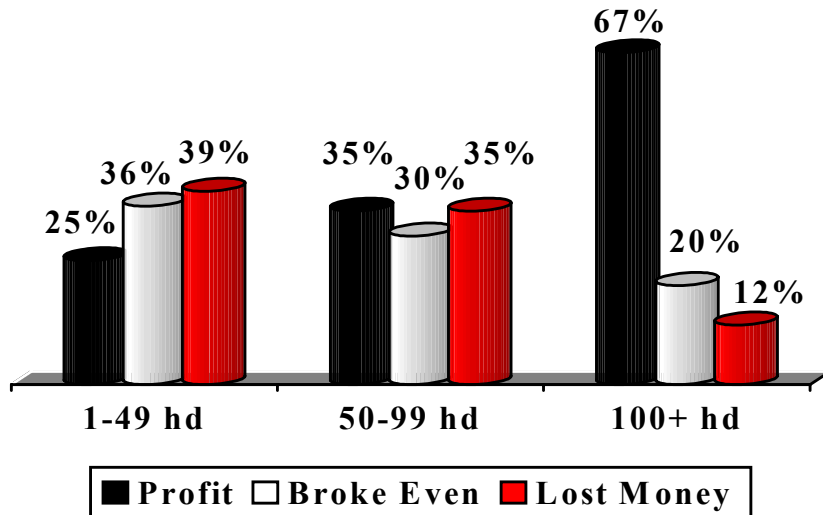
Forages rose to the top of the request for new research. The need for a forage that grows year round or at least one that grows from October through December, drought tolerant grasses, grasses for wet areas, more productive perennial and winter and forage varieties, and pest management primarily in pastures (weeds and insects). Also mentioned were alternative feed supplements and ways to either reduce costs or increase price received to improve profitability.

Analysis of Profitability

One question often asked is, “Do these practices really affect profitability?” A comparison was made between the use of a few key recommended practices and profitability from the operations that responded to the 2002 Northwest Florida Survey.

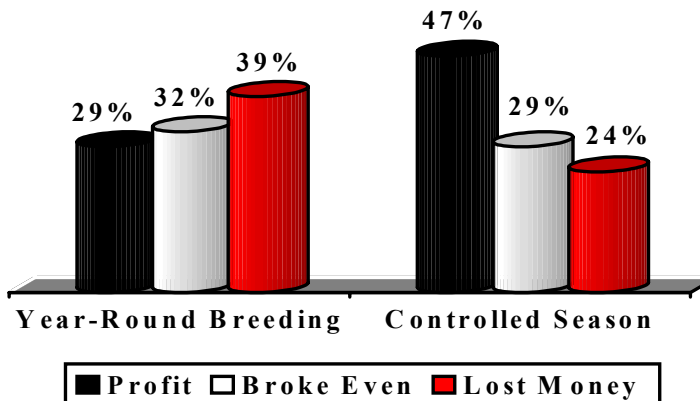
When herd size is also taken into account, it is clear that the larger operations were more often profitable.

Profitability by Herd Size



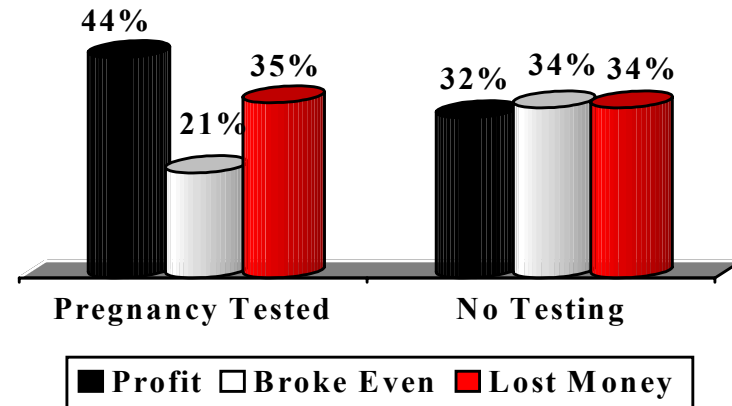
From the response comparison of all herd size groups, having a controlled breeding season is also a valuable tool for improving profitability.

Profitability of Controlled vs. Year-Round Breeding Season



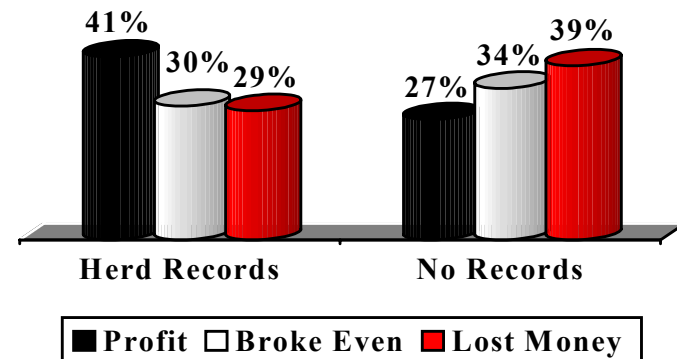
Although not as clear as with the breeding season, the herds that pregnancy tested their herd annually were more often profitable.

Profitability Comparison of Pregnancy Testing



Herd record keeping also provided some improvement in the profitability comparisons of the cattle operations in this study.

Profitability Comparison of Record Keeping



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the 264 producer responses, agents and specialists will be able to plan educational efforts and research to strengthen the beef cattle industry in the Panhandle region. Following are some perceived strengths and weaknesses of the cattle operations in the region based on the results of this study.

Strengths

Certainly the years of experience in the industry are very valuable. The vast majority of the producers surveyed, 70%, have been producing beef cattle for more than 10 years. The average weaning weights, 481 pounds, and the average weaning rate of 81% of cows exposed to a bull, certainly have room for improvement, but are indicators of the efficiency of the herds in the region. There is also a high level of interest in improving operations through education, with 59% of the producers surveyed utilizing Extension information in the last 12 months.

One of the strengths is in the area of forage and pasture management. This should not be a surprise due to the amount of row crop farming in the region. The average stocking rate of 2.2 acres per cow shows the intensity of forage management as compared to other regions. One factor in this is that 82% of the operations plant high quality temporary winter forages to minimize hay and supplement use. This also can be noted by the fact that 48% of operations rely on soil test results for making fertilization decisions.

In the area of reproduction, the high use of EPD's for bull selection indicates that genetic quality is becoming more important than price. The fact that 83% of the bulls being used are from 5 breeds, and that 86% of the herds use only one or two breeds of bulls is helping build more uniformity in the cattle herds. Another positive indicator of the genetic improvement taking place is the fact that 15% of the herds in the region are using artificial insemination (A.I.). This management technique is not practical for all herds, but allows producers access to the most promising bull genetics in the nation.

A strength in the area of herd health is the level of internal (91%) and external (95%) parasite control in the breeding herd.

Weaknesses

One weakness that is not unique to this area is herd size. When 78% of the herds have less than 100 head, many marketing and production efficiency options are limited. Marketing was mentioned by a number of producers as an area they need help with. With fewer and fewer auction markets, many producers are looking for alternatives, but herd size and the lack of a controlled breeding season make other options more complicated.

Another weakness is the percentage of operations utilizing herd record keeping. Only 55% of the operations in this study kept herd records, and of these only 62% kept production records. It is difficult to manage what you don't measure. With only 35% of the producers in this study indicating that they made a profit over the last four years, record keeping for decision making might play a role in improving this figure. Especially when the prices received for calves has been fairly strong over the four year period. As prices begin to fall in 2005 and beyond, cost cutting and money management will be even more crucial.

In the area of reproduction, the most notable weakness was that only 38% of the operations surveyed had a controlled breeding season. This one factor affects the use of a number of other recommended herd management practices. One of these is the use of pregnancy testing. Only 29% of the operations in this study checked at least part of their herd for pregnancy in 2002. Culling cattle that do not rebreed in a reasonable length of time has long been advocated as the best way manage reproductive efficiency.

While producers in this study did a good job of parasite control, only 40% vaccinated their herds against disease. Not many more producers vaccinated their calves to prevent disease. Only 48% of the producers vaccinated their calves to prevent clostridial diseases (black leg) and only 26% vaccinated against shipping fever or respiratory and digestive diseases.

In the area of nutrition, 48% of the producers in this study indicated that they used protein blocks. While this is a very convenient method for supplementing hay, it is also one of the most expensive sources of protein available. Another discouraging figure was that only 11% of the operations utilized forage analysis to determine the level of supplement needed. Although this practice is not necessary for every cutting of hay, having some idea as to the quality of the hay being fed can be very valuable in developing a balanced diet for protein and energy and also for ensuring efficient use of resources.

IMPLICATIONS FOR IFAS EXTENSION AND RESEARCH

In summarizing the needs of producers and the weaknesses in the current management schemes, it seems clear that improving efficiency, cutting costs, improving forage and herd production, and seeking marketing alternatives should be the key issues in educational programming and research. Although profitability is not always the most important goal of all of the cattle operations in the region, almost every operation needs to operate at or above break-even cost. Setting the priorities and specific goals to reach these objectives should be carried out in the long range planning efforts for Extension programming and research by the Northwest Florida District Agriculture Program Implementation Team.

There is still a need to continue with outreach efforts to this group as well. County Extension Agents were rated fairly highly overall as a source of information, however, 32% of the survey respondents indicated that they seldom or never utilize their local County Extension Agent even though the producers selected for this study came from County Extension mailing lists.

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Acknowledgement

The agents and researchers serving in the Northwest Florida Panhandle would like to thank the producers who responded to this survey. Their input will be very useful in providing a better understanding of the cattle industry in this region and will also provide valuable insight for future IFAS Extension and Research planning efforts.

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