



SOUTH DAKOTA  
STATE UNIVERSITY

Department of Animal Science

# Beef Day 2020

## Extension

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### **beefSD: Creating Learning Communities to Improve Management Capacity of Beginning Beef Producers**

#### **Description**

The average age of agriculture producers in the U.S. is 58 and has been steadily rising over the last several decades. As the large cohort of older producers retires, ensuring that beginning producers are successful as their replacements is paramount. The goal of the beefSD program has been to provide a curriculum to beginning producers that equips them with the tools and capacity to make wise management decisions that lead to economic, ecological, and sociological sustainability and contribute to ongoing agricultural production, land stewardship, and rural community viability. The objective of this curriculum is to provide them with knowledge of the entire beef industry and the skills to assess change factors that will influence their economic sustainability. beefSD is a learning community experience that takes beef producers in South Dakota through an intensive look at their business. By developing management skills, becoming aware of enterprise development, and networking, producers have made major shifts in their business that in turn supports their rural communities.

The program was initiated in the fall of 2010. Three cohorts have completed the program which include 111 people from 69 operations from across the state. Currently, Class 4 has completed over half of the two-year program with 26 participants from 16 operations from across the state. Each class has had the same key foundational building blocks: educational workshops, case study mentors, ranch-to-rail carcass evaluation, travel study trips and network development.

**Instructional Workshops.** Workshops consist of two-day meetings that included two major components: classroom instruction and case studies. The specific location of each workshop changes for each session so that it is near the case study ranch for that session. Classroom instruction covers livestock, natural resources, marketing, business, financial, legal, and risk management tools. The livestock production and natural resource management curriculum includes nutrition, range management, genetics, reproduction, animal health, and other topics. One 2-day workshop has been focused on livestock marketing, and another on estate-planning and generational transition. Additionally, beefSD producers participate in BEEF 2020 and the South Dakota Grazing School. Between face-to-face workshops, monthly webinars are provided to help them continue to learn and to maintain interaction among participants.

**Case Studies.** The second component of the instructional workshops has been case studies of four production systems. For the first 3 classes, these included: 1) retained ownership through backgrounding of calves, 2) retained ownership to slaughter, 3) seedstock production, and 4)

grass-fed production. In Class 4, the backgrounding case study is being replaced by a case study about developing additional enterprises (e.g. hunting) to support additional generations on a given ranch. Established, successful ranchers serve as case-study coaches, host tours of their operations and lead discussions about ranch history, management philosophy and style, and decision-making criteria.

**Post-Weaning Calf Performance Evaluation.** Most South Dakota beef producers market weaned calves as their end product through a local auction market with minimal knowledge of the remaining production stages necessary to produce meat products and no knowledge of how their calves perform post-weaning. It is important that beginning ranchers come to understand the entire beef production system in order to enhance their opportunity to adapt to accelerating business change in agriculture. It is also important that they learn the value of knowing their cattle's post-weaning performance. Beginning ranchers have been asked to place several animals each into a post-weaning performance evaluation program. Participants received feeding performance (ADG, etc.), economic data (cost of gain, net income, etc.), and carcass data (carcass weight, quality and yield grade, etc.) on their cattle.

**Mentoring.** Mentoring has been a major key to beginning rancher success during this project. Beginning ranchers develop personal relationships with case-study coaches and mentors during workshops, by exchange of information through web-based activities, and during travel-study trips. Additionally, a private group on Facebook is used as an online platform for participants to maintain an ongoing conversation about beef production.

**Travel Studies.** Two, week-long trips are conducted to expose participants to the entire U.S. beef cattle industry beyond South Dakota, emphasizing the size and scope of the industry. One trip exposes them to other production segments of the industry by including large commercial feedlots, a processing plant, a replacement heifer development enterprise, low-stress livestock handling, and other tour stops. This trip has gone south of South Dakota into Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska. Additionally, while in Colorado, participants meet at the Beef Checkoff Culinary Kitchen and Cattle Fax headquarters to learn about the services they provide for cattle producers. The other trip exposes participants to the breadth of marketing opportunities by immersion in an urban experience with wholesalers, retailers, and consumers. Participants visit wholesale outlets for USDA Prime product for high-end restaurants, upscale grocery outlets, farmers markets, neighborhood meat markets, a white-tablecloth steak house, and other novel local marketing outlets to experience alternative product (grass-fed, natural, and organic) marketing. Thus, participants are exposed to local purchasing opportunities of large city consumers.

### Highlights or Impacts

Program evaluation has been a continuous process throughout all 4 classes. The project team engaged consulting services of an evaluation professional to assist with assessment of ongoing progress towards desired outcomes. We have conducted three surveys during most classes. The first has been at the beginning to determine baseline knowledge levels, the second has been at the midpoint of the program, and the third has been conducted at the end to determine progress toward impacts and outcomes.

Additionally, an evaluation of all alumni of classes 1 through 3 has recently been completed to assess longer-term impacts. Examples of impacts measure in this survey:

- 67% increased their production acres
- 83% increased their cattle herd size
- 96% increased profitability
- 88% use different market strategy than before the program
- 88% increased conservation & resource management
- 72% increase in local community volunteerism
- 100% would recommend the program
- 54% would volunteer to help with the program in the form of a mentor, case study or speaker
- 90% increased their financial situation
- Priceless; the dollar value 1/3 of the participants place on their experience.

Quotes provided on the evaluation by participants:

"I value this program at:

\$60,000- the amount I made changing marketing plans

\$0 - the amount we lost in an estate transfer when my dad died

\$ Priceless- the value of the knowledge" —*beefSD Alumnus*

"We have opened up doors we never thought we would before BeefSD, creating doors to sell bulls locally; marketing our calves to local feedlots which eliminated the cost of selling at sale barn; we are currently selling meat by the pound in the freezer which has opened up a whole new market for us, which we see expanding every time we sell another calf, which we know is making us money; we purchased sheep to open our doors to another enterprise system. We are always looking at different ways to market our animals and be more prosperous because of that, which we go back to learning & growing through BeefSD." — *beefSD Alumnus*

"As we understand more, use different techniques, strategies and ideas, our management team morphs and grows. It is so nice to have network of people with various skills, abilities and knowledge to help us do our best." — *beefSD Alumnus*

"We are more comfortable going into new enterprises with the knowledge we gained in beefSD, vs just taking calves to the sale barn and hoping for the best. Now we can take those cattle to different enterprises to capture more dollars of profit per animal." — *beefSD Alumnus*

"I believe that the beefSD program gave us a foundation of understanding the ag industry as a whole as well as our own business. The program provided a well-rounded view of the industry and included the importance of conservation and resource management. We have made various improvements and have participated in several conservation projects since beefSD such as being a part of the WWF Sustainable Ranching Initiative and participating in the CSP program." — *beefSD Alumnus*

"The beef industry is continually changing. Without BeefSD you would not be able to keep up with all the changes. Also you get a great education regarding marketing cattle, feeding cattle,

and most important how to budget to make sure you make money. It has also allowed us to start looking at the operation as a business that needs to make money. Also without BeefSD our estate plan would not be moving along as nicely as it is. Estate planning is time consuming and not an easy conversation. BeefSD gave us the background to get started!” — *beefSD Alumnus*

“BeefSD is a great program. A lot of other young producers would benefit from this program. The beef industry has changed a lot and families need to change in order to stay in the business. BeefSD gives young producers the tools they need to keep the family ranch!” – *beefSD Alumnus*

“The program opened my eyes to so many more opportunities and options of how to market my cattle. Learning how to maximize profit out of my own raised calves and possibly buying cattle and profiting on them as well.” – *beefSD Alumnus*

“For us, the program was priceless based on our unique situation going in. It would be hard to imagine where we would be in our marriage and business if it were not for the program. It was very timely for us. We can't say enough good things about it and we encourage others to look into it whenever we can.” – *beefSD Alumnus*

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