In any given herd, each goat either adds to or takes away from the profitability of the operation. This singular statement should be the foundation of all herd selection practices, but many times is lost in the breeding process. Goats are selected based on appearance, correctness, and pedigree, (all of which can be great things) however, as producers have you looked at each animal for their individual profitability beyond the number of kids they produce?

Looking at each goat individually will require a great deal of record keeping and observation. Each year may look different, even with the same animals. Hard decisions are made each season on which does should be retained for another year and which need to find new zip codes. These decisions are made even more difficult by goats that may hold many of the traits an operation holds dear but lack others of equal importance. There is no perfect goat after all. In an effort to possibly make some of these decisions easier down the road lets focus on the big one; individual feed efficiency.

Feed efficiency is in this nutritionist’s opinion the most important trait in the selective process. After all, the leading cost of any operation after the initial livestock purchase is the feed bill. Around five years ago my wife and I purchased a new buck as an outcross to our program. In many ways he fit everything we needed for the next generation but unfortunately he flipped our program upside down. At first, all seemed as if he would work. His kids were thrifty at birth, grew great, and were very consistent in type and kind. We retained many daughters and added them to the breeding herd from his first kidding and made our breeding plans. Unfortunately, that’s when things took a turn for the worst. When his first daughters joined the breeding pens they all seemed to lose weight rather easily despite the fact all of the other does were holding weight well. When they kidded for the first time things only got worse. They fell apart within the first couple of weeks, leaving us no option but to offer more and more grain in an effort to get them to milk and hold weight. When their kids were weaned, they were smaller than the kids from other bloodlines within the same kidding. Additionally, we had to separate the mothers following weaning and feed them additional grain supplement to get them back into shape, while does from other bloodlines went directly to the breeding pens. After only one kidding we realized that the purchased buck had created hard keeping does.

So how can producers make decisions earlier to avoid a similar situation to ours? Simply put, data collection and intentional selection. A great deal of effort is put into selecting and tracking traits that may seem more tangible at times, however adding feed efficiency to the selection process will dramatically improve the stock retained into the herd. One way of doing this, is by tracking the average supplement required per head per day. For instance, if a group of 100 does receives 200 lb of grain per day, the average supplement per head per day would be 2 lb. Within the group of 100 does there will be some that get fat and some that are underweight. Although dominance will play a part, the underweight does are in many cases less efficient users of the nutrition available. Each season when selecting replacements females always consider not only the productive efficiency of the family but the feed efficiency of the sire and dam as well. If for instance a particular doe in the previous example was consistently underweight, it is likely her progeny will struggle similarly. Using the average supplement offered data, one can select replacements only from the does that held more weight than necessary in a group. Does or bucks that would require more grain each year than the herd average should never be kept regardless of the merits of their other traits. When purchasing an outcross, ask questions of the breeder to gather enough data to select the most efficient animal available. Doing this consistently each year will allow any producer to breed in more efficient traits and lower the amount of supplement purchased in time.

Supplementing productive and growing stock will be necessary at times but an astute eye will quickly realize some stock require more supplement than others. Selecting stock based on feed efficiency is a great way to improve the profit margin of a herd. Feed companies will happily sell an operation as much feed as they are willing to buy, but no producer should want to brag about the size of their feed bills. When we consider each animal individually on this trait, we can breed a more profitable herd each generation. Remember, feed efficiency is an individual trait and it either adds to or takes away from the overall operation profitability.