

# COMMON GROUND

## Old and new tools promise a healthy herd



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Since the time of cattle drives in the West, cowboys have known the importance of keeping their herds healthy. Today there is more science behind herd health, allowing us to combine that cowboy intuition with genetic selection for an even better outcome.

On the horizon there seems to be significant promise to better understand the relationship between genetics and health. Science is uncovering the heritability in cattle immune system response and overall disease resistance. Early discoveries are showing that genetics play a role in why some cattle get sick and others don't, which means we'll be able to ultimately select for healthier cattle. That is an exciting advancement and holds promise to improve performance, lower costs and reduce antibiotic use as an industry.

Even before these tools are perfected and implemented, there are some very significant contributions our genetic tools can make today for improving overall health that might get overlooked.

**DOCILITY.** The first that comes to mind is disposition or docility. It has been very well-documented that nervous or excitable cattle are more likely to get sick. Work done at Iowa State University found cattle that scored poorly on temperament also tended to have reduced performance and higher death loss. Researchers at Mississippi State University concurred and found that nervous cattle had more days of treatment, more medicine cost and lower profitability.

The American Angus Association began publishing a docility expected progeny difference (EPD) in the spring of 2008 to aid cattlemen in selecting for disposition. There are many benefits to selecting for improved docility, or certainly eliminating animals with poor docility. Health is definitely on that list — not to mention keeping the hired man and wife happy and reducing the time spent fixing busted fence!

I think there are a number of other health benefits associated with genetic selection. While these are much less documented in the scientific literature, I think they stand up to good “cowboy logic.” Several of these benefits tie back to colostrum. We understand it is very important to get colostrum, or “first milk,” into the newborn calf as soon as possible, or within the first few hours. It stands to reason that anything that keeps that from happening has the potential to affect the calf's ability to fight off disease long-term.

**CALVING EASE.** We've all seen those big calves that had a hard birth be slow to get up and go. Dystocia takes its toll on the cow, too. She can be far less excited about mothering that calf or even claiming it altogether. In the end, the calf may be slow to nurse and get that much-needed colostrum.

The opposite can also be an issue. There's no need to take light birth weights to extremes, as those tiny calves can have trouble getting going, too. By using the calving ease direct (CED) and calving ease maternal (CEM) EPDs, cattlemen are able to make improvements and reduce dystocia.

Another factor of selection that also contributes to colostrum intake is udder quality. Angus have always been known for high-quality udders and, therefore, an EPD doesn't exist. Making sure we are culling cows with big or “balloon” teats is always a good idea, and it sets us up for improving health over the long run.

There are lots of exciting things on the horizon in the field of genetics to improve animal health, but we also have some practical and well-proven selection tools already at our disposal. By combining those tools, the future of herd health looks promising. |

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