

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

## Making cows

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



Mature cows create today's profits, while the replacement heifer cohort is quite simply a cost

center. Replacement heifers have the opportunity cost of not selling, plus the cost of development. Success is dependent on each replacement cohort's ability to attain levels of productivity. They need to pay off those costs and then make a profitable return on investment.

The beef production cycle is slow. The outcomes resulting from heifer selection don't become apparent for months on end.

This unhurried pace is a disadvantage in that the effects of choices made are revealed long after the decision. When coupled

with the fact a beef cow's productivity is measured over multiple years, it becomes clear perfecting the decision-making process requires patience in addition to a systematic approach to collecting data.

Furthermore, progress will be incremental — not immediate. This snail's pace demands discipline to focus on and stick with intentional and purposeful approaches.

### Discipline

Effective planning requires the pursuit of established goals. For our ranch, we expect the following outcomes from the females we invite into the work of converting the blessing of rangeland into high-quality protein.

- ▶ First-calf heifers becoming

pregnant in the first 30 days of the breeding season

- ▶ Unassisted calving every time
- ▶ Weans a calf in her first year of productivity and at least six more
- ▶ Demonstrates a good disposition
- ▶ Exhibits soundness of hoof, leg and udder structure
- ▶ Stays healthy in elevations ranging from 8,000 to 11,000 feet above sea level
- ▶ Remains productive under variable weather and feed conditions
- ▶ Never gives us an unpleasant surprise

### Measuring progress

To determine our progress against these goals, we have a scoreboard that is founded on a functional, yet simple, recordkeeping system. The basis for our recordkeeping system is individual cow ID. Every calf receives a tag with its dam's tag number. When a replacement is diagnosed pregnant the first time, she then receives a unique tag number. To help preserve the system, all cows are double-tagged.

We collect data within 24 hours of birth that include calving ease, date of birth and gender. Then we track calf health and survival via treatment and death loss recordkeeping. Every cow is pregnancy-tested every year and is evaluated for soundness at calving, branding and at weaning.

We invest time into our bull selection process and follow a disciplined approach. It begins with taking the sale list from our seedstock supplier and drawing a big red X through every candidate that doesn't fit into the ranges we establish for key expected progeny differences (EPDs), with a particular emphasis on moderating milk and

mature size. We then evaluate the remaining bulls on the list for soundness and disposition, removing any with undesirable traits from the candidate list.

Replacement females selected at weaning must have been born in the first 40 days of the calving season, were not treated for respiratory disease, and are sound and healthy. We then manage to prepare them for a lifetime where forage will comprise most of their diet. Then we wait.

### While we wait

In that time of waiting, we've thought about other traits we wish our cows would exhibit:

- ▶ Refuse to ever interact with our neighbors' bulls
- ▶ Encourage our herd bulls to stay strong and confident during breeding season
- ▶ Never test a fence, dog, horse or mountain biker
- ▶ Wait for permission to go through an open gate
- ▶ Help pull strings from round bales at feeding
- ▶ Never take a bathroom break in the alley or chute
- ▶ Not only know the location of every water source on our ranch, but send a message if they find a tank that is low

Maybe we'll work on this list sometime down the road. For now, it comes down to sticking to the fundamentals with focus and discipline, while collecting the data to make sure we can connect the outcomes to the choices that generated them. ■

Editor's note: In "Outside the Box," a regular, separate column in both the *Angus Journal*® and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship.