

Beef Talk: Bull selection and managing risk

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Consider this an invite to help beef producers manage risk. The greater the risk, the more likely the selected choice is wrong, and as producers, we want to minimize risk.

Bull buying involves risk because a bull without the desired genes will not

meet management goals for expected calf performance. Bull-buying risk can be minimized by understanding the available genetic data for the desired bull through the implementation and utilization of the associated tools to access that data.

Although risk never can be eliminated,

Reduce the risk by buying the right bull for your operation.

bull-selection workshops through the North Dakota State University Extension Service and Extension efforts across the country are offered to help producers decrease the risk of buying the wrong bull. These small workshops provide two to three hours of interaction with producers to help them better understand current opportunities to select bulls.

The workshops provide the ability to spend two to three hours with a few producers at a time. As producers express their goals and objectives regarding their current bull needs, time can be spent explaining the tools that are available to better meet each producer's goals and objectives.

Producer minds have opened as they come to better understand what the available numbers mean. A review of each producer's previous bull purchases reveals how successful each producer was in meeting current genetic benchmarks within the herd. The outcome: spending money wisely.

These workshops do not set producer goals and objectives, because the beef industry has many goals and objectives. Obviously, positive financial outcomes are desired, but even then, short-term objectives may seem less profitable, but in the long run, they produce a more profitable herd.

Time to do homework

So bull-selection season is here, and it is homework time.

A strong tendency still exists to go with one's gut feeling and bypass available individual bull data. Why? The three main reasons could be as follows:

- first, a general lack of understanding of what the data mean and how to apply the data;
- second, a lack of how the data can be integrated and evaluated against individual herd goals and objectives; and
- third, a residual feeling that what is visual is easy to understand.

Thus, an appreciation of historic concepts is solid and keeps producers satisfied.

Historic effort

Bull selection has not changed since cattle were domesticated. For most of those centuries, a bull was needed to mate with and settle cows. Through time, a quick visual evaluation of the bull's reproductive tract became sufficient, but keep in mind, producers had no scientific understanding of fertilization and conception until recently in the timeline of the domestication of cattle.

We still need to remind ourselves of

one very simple principle established well in excess of 200 years ago by Robert Bakewell: “Like produces like or the likeness of some ancestor; inbreeding produces prepotency and refinement; breed the best to the best.” And so the breeding of domestic cattle began in earnest, and the early progenitors of today’s cattle breeds were established and subsequently set.

The same principle works today, especially when buying bulls: “Breed the best to the best.”

Another scholar from the past, Sir Francis Bacon, said, “Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, but to weigh and consider.” These are good thoughts when buying bulls and bear repeating:

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“Breed the best to the best.”
“Weigh and consider.”

Unfortunately, the simple part has become complicated because the amount of information currently available can be mindboggling. Remember, reviewing numbers and setting one’s objective still is based on selecting the bull that has the best opportunity to meet the herd objective. A critical element for future success of beef operations involves reducing risk, so sign up for a bull-selection workshop.

The workshops encourage producers to better understand where they are, based on historic genetic inputs, and develop a selection plan that will move or maintain their production objectives. Ultimately, they will minimize the risk of spending money on the wrong bull.

The process a producer utilizes should maintain the principles that are core standards of the operation. Each individual cattle operation has its own wealth of knowledge regarding the operation and management of the farm or ranch and the type of cattle needed.

Today, instead of going with one’s gut feeling and accepting historical risk, one actually can lower the risk associated with spending money on bulls. Keeping current on sire selection tools is the key, and learning these keys can have a very positive impact on reaching long-term objectives.

The opportunity is real, and so is the benefit.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu.

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