

# Outside the Box: Making good ones

by **TOM FIELD,**  
NCBA executive director  
of producer education



Driving down the main alleyway of a cattle feedyard provides a firsthand view of the cumulative genetic and management decisions of our industry. Some pens are uniform in color and type, while others represent more divergence in frame, muscularity and appearance.

However, without the performance sheet that quantifies the intake, conversion, cost of gain and health status of each pen, it would be difficult to assess differences in profitability.

On a recent visit to the feeding region of the Texas Panhandle, I asked a yard

manager if our industry had increased the performance and quality of cattle coming into feedlots during the past 20 years. His response startled me when he replied, “probably not.” While allowing that certainly there were producers who were providing improved feeder cattle value, his take was that there were still too many cattle that came up short due to insufficient genetic merit, poor management decisions or both.

My first reaction was to disagree because of my assumption that the plethora of genetic selection tools available to the industry surely had resulted in better cattle. However, the closeout sheets on the dashboard provided evidence contrary to my belief. The variability in performance from pen to pen is still a barrier to the overall profitability of the industry to its ability to deliver consistent products to the retail and foodservice sectors.

## What would you say?

I couldn't help but wonder how cow-calf producers would respond to the same question. Are you producing better calves than you did a decade or two ago? And the natural follow-up question: Are you buying better bulls than you have in the past? My guess is that the answers would be as variable as the pens of cattle in that Panhandle feedyard.

It is important to understand what factors characterize producers who believe they are buying better seedstock and producing cattle of higher value. Unfortunately, there is not a data set that adequately provides quantitative evidence to answer these questions, so one is left to speculate. My view is that cattlemen who produce the top end of cattle in the beef industry likely share the following commonalities:

- Pursuit of a clear set of goals
- Disciplined approach to selection
- Decisions based on credible information
- Networked across segments
- Effective blend of genetics and management

Creating superior cattle by both seedstock and commercial producers depends on development of a well-defined set of goals upon which to create a course of action. This step is extremely important and deserves the full attention of herd management. To capitalize on future profit opportunities, the creation of a genetic strategy requires a deep understanding of the ranch environment, the marketplace and emerging technologies.

Once goals are established, progress can only be sustained if selection occurs under a disciplined and focused approach. When it comes to genetic improvement, there are no quick fixes or shortcuts. Long-term

improvement requires a dual emphasis on both choosing herd sires and replacement stock, and culling parents that don't perform. There isn't room for impulse purchases, making excuses for a favorite cow or indecisiveness. The extended production cycle of beef cattle requires that managers choose wisely and without hesitation. A missed generation in a cattle enterprise is a major setback.

### **Credible information vital**

Effective implementation of selection and culling is fully dependent on access to credible information upon which good decisions can be based. Measuring performance against the selection objectives established at the beginning of the process requires a strategy that is thought out well and that assures data is collected, synthesized and used to make decisions. Individual animal identification, access to a scale and commitment to data collection are required. Developing an understanding of emerging genetic evaluation technologies and data management systems underpins the ability to capture opportunities in the future.

With a growing emphasis on exporting beef, meeting domestic demand with branded and specified production system approaches, and increasing pressure from consumers to be more informed about the food system, cattle producers must take a holistic approach to making selection and management decisions that recognize the value and price signals throughout the beef supply chain. As the marketplace continues to evolve, success in the future will be centered on gaining access to markets and being in a position to substantiate conformance to market specifications and requirements for branded or niche products.

In the context of continuous learning, developing a thorough understanding of the beef supply chain is near the top of the list. Knowledge coupled with a strong professional network that reaches across regions and segments will prove to be increasingly valuable.

Finally, genetic improvement alone will not yield sustained profit opportunities. A systems approach that integrates both genetic and production management decisions will be required to make better cattle. Integrated health, nutrition and reproductive management is required for animals to express their genetic potential and for producers to capture the full value of their efforts.

The chaotic nature of the current economic and political landscape creates pressure that distracts our focus on creating value, but the long-term beef demand opportunities are substantial. We have the technologies and skill to make better cattle across the industry. Those who make the commitment will benefit, and those who do not will find fewer opportunities for profit in the future.

