

# BeefTalk: Expanding Genetics and Electronic Bull Buying



Bull Buying is Changing - Whether you buy in-person or electronically, bull-buying basics are the same.

The way bulls are sold is changing.

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Bull buying from your desk at home? It sounds far-fetched, but that is a very real option in today's bull market.

Each year, a new generation of bulls is offered for sale, along with more and better data regarding the bulls we buy. Last year's bull calves are growing up and will be ready for turnout in a few months.

Bull-buying basics are the same, so why bring up the subject? In reality, many producers do not take advantage of the data and tools available for buying bulls. Not all bulls are the same and certainly do not have the same value.

The process of determining the better bull brings good discussion and requires homework. Why? Simply put, years, if not decades, of visual selection based on how cattle look is the foundation of almost all breeding programs. For years, visual selection and pedigree review have been the status quo when buying bulls. This method remains today. It involves analyzing cattle and subjectively estimating how selected lines of cattle with known production capabilities will perform.

Those visual traits help determine the value of cattle as breeding stock and at sale time when the progeny are sold. But things changed, as long ago as 1963, when a group of producers formed the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association. Similar associations were formed all across the country and, in concert with breed associations, today are the seeds of current data sets available for buying bulls.

The opportunity to buy local bulls and sort the best of the best remains. But producers still need to be proactive in learning new techniques to sort the best of the best because buying bulls is a

crucial investment made with the expectations of good progeny. Dollars are often limited and are only spent once, so getting the right bulls is critical.

Today, the way bulls are selling also is changing. Video auctions are common. Sale bulls, presented with all available data, are guaranteed by the breeder. In many cases, the bulls are videoed and displayed on a website, so visual observations are made easily.

On sale day, the bull appears on the sale monitor and, with a click of the mouse, a producer can buy a bull anywhere, and I mean anywhere. Recently, I made plans to attend a sale only to find out that the bulls are no longer even brought into the ring. Large computer screens were set up on each side of the ring, and those present bid off the videos previously available on the website. I stayed home and bid from my own computer screen using the trusted mouse.

Actually, at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, the last time we purchased bulls in person was two years ago. We have signed up in advance with the online auction company, stayed home and bid.

Has the experience always been good? Most times, yes. Once the mouse was not as quick as the auctioneer, but that simply may be a learning curve for the auctioneer and producer. Either way, electronic bull buying works. Even more satisfying is that many bull sellers offer a significant opportunity for delivery.

So times are changing along with just how these bulls can end up at a beef producer's lot. However, the original concern to see the bulls in person always seems to come up in the conversation. How does one take the step to move away from history and move forward?

Goodness results when producers gather, visit, eat and share their thoughts. I am not suggesting that should end. When that is the most opportune way to buy bulls, use it. But if the wind is blowing, the snow is falling and the roads are closing, why not attend the bull sale from the comfort of your home? Sign up early and get approved for both options.

Think of how many calves, the progeny of the bulls one buys, are going to be sold via video auction? If the calves can sell, perhaps the bulls can, too. If a producer visits with the local auction barn, one certainly will obtain some good information of the various opportunities to market calves. And yes, the eye of the buyer in many cases has switched to data. Using good data to buy calves and bulls is a good thing for buyers and sellers.

Producers are more and more accepting of reviewing the factual data of a bull and then adding the bull to the potential bid list or taking the bull off the potential bid list. In the coming weeks, an excellent activity is searching bull catalogs or websites for bulls, finding their registration numbers, looking up their available data and developing the bid list. Once the list is done, visit with the breeder, make arrangements to bid and only bid from the bid list. Avoid the bargains.

May you find all your ear tags.