

Beef Production Equation Involves Bull, Cow Qualities

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



Imagine if all the breeding programs in the world were the same. There would be less discussion about expected progeny differences (EPDs). There would be one easy-to-use formula to create the next generation of beef cattle.

At this time of year there is a lot of talk about bull purchases and how to use EPDs. What seems to get lost in the shuffle, however, is the power of the cow. Producers rarely purchase cow herds, however cows provide the balance of the equation. Complicated, complex and very dynamic are some apt cow descriptors.

After several conversations in response to recent BeefTalk articles, I realize the range in understanding beef genetics and appropriate interactions with management is very broad. In the past, there was an “animal breeder” or “animal geneticist,” a person who studied, designed and implemented animal breeding programs. In recent years, as is often the case, people have shifted to classifying genetics through a number, ie, EPDs, and assumed the term “breeder” was the artificial insemination (AI) technician.

EPDs are useful and important tools but need to be kept in perspective. If I pick up a screw driver, I do not become a mechanic. In the same vein, using EPDs doesn't make a person an animal breeder. Why? Welcome to the world of cows.

Beef cattle production is more than putting a bull in the pasture with cows. There are many questions that need to be answered. What are your goals? How does your cow herd fit?

I always smile when I hear people at a dispersion sale of a reputable cow herd say, “If only I could buy those cows, I would be successful in the cattle business.” That's not true because the cows are only the end product of an animal breeder's dream. Environment, time and strategy produced that successful end product.

One producer's dreams may not be your dreams. An outward response seldom reveals the herd's inward design. The same can be said for those producers who produce bulls. Probably the most significant bull buying strategy is to know the seller's herd and production philosophy.

Another often-asked question, is “Should I travel a distance to so and so's herd to buy a bull?” Most likely not. Locally adapted bulls are generally readily available and can certainly be verified through comparing EPDs. Bulls of similar EPD values would be projected to have similar genetic impact within your herd, plus local bulls will adapt more quickly to the new environment. There truly is “no place like home.”

The most important decision a commercial producer makes in selection is the bull producer, not the bull. Does the bull producer have the kind of bulls that will maximize production from your cows? Take time to get to know the producer's goals and merge them with your own.

One local producer notes, “Production records, EPDs and ultrasound data, integrated with the integrity, knowledge and guidance of the buyer and seller, are all required for a successful bull purchase.” Through such efforts, consistent production can be maintained, instead of a plan of peaks and valleys.

The typical cow herd has almost 15 years of genetic input within it. The bull you purchased in 1990 probably still has daughters in production within your herd today. Milk, longevity, fertility, maternal instinct, udder traits, fleshing ability, soundness and maternal size are the ingredients the animal breeder works with.

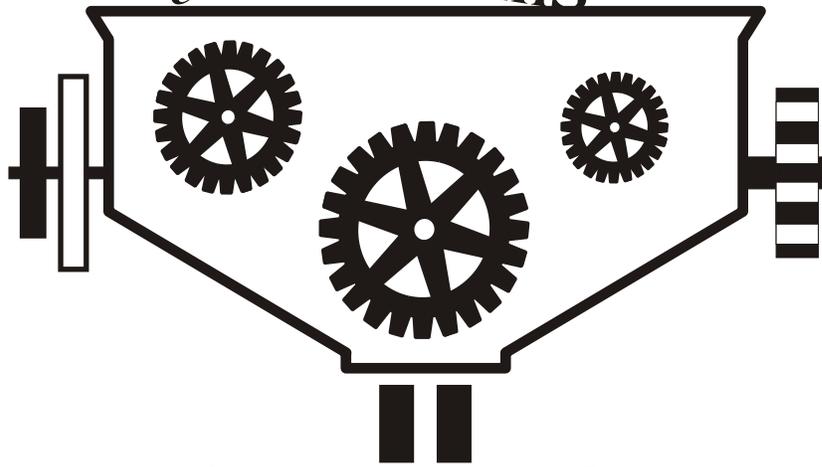
Although EPDs guide us for many of the traits, maintaining balance within a herd and effective use of within breed and across breed heterosis (line breeding and crossbreeding) are all very important for long term success and profitability. The actual bull purchase and subsequent union with the cows requires the need to read all the signs. Ask your local “animal breeder.”

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0081.

Animal Breeding: Comprehensive Complexity

Goals Cows Environment
Heterosis Philosophy
Time Production Strategy EPDs
Bulls



**Successful
Breeding Program**