

BeefTalk 589: Culling Rate Is Not Just for Cows



Animal replacement often is over looked as a beef business expense.

There are two very noticeable expenses in the beef business. The most obvious is feed and the one most often forgotten is animal replacement.

Replacing cows, even if the cost is not added up, just happens, and the same is true for bulls. However, the bill is huge.

A producer once called and was concerned that the banker was critical of the age of the cows in the herd. The producer was very successful in keeping older cows productive, but the banker felt the cows were too old. In reality, the banker needed to rethink what he felt because producers should be commended and not reprimanded for increasing the longevity of the herd.

If we were to review the cow herd appraisal of performance software benchmarks, producers are culling at about 14 percent of the cows exposed and replacing those cows at a rate of approximately 15 percent. The resulting average age of the cows in the herd is 5.7 years. The average age has increased slightly during the last decade, which is good.

Some active herd improvers will cringe because increasing age certainly raises generational intervals and slows genetic change. However, a little more change in the form of coins in the pocket is not all bad, so the banker should have appreciated the producer's efforts at maintaining productive longevity in the cow herd.

Likewise, the issue of bull longevity often is overlooked, but the reality of culling bulls is a given and a crisp walk in the bull pen is needed. Given all the data, rankings and re-sorting of the bulls, one overwhelming trait trumps all other traits. Bulls need to be sound, both structurally and mentally.

Perhaps the goal of most bulls is to be dominant someday and oversee the all the cows in the pasture. However, the reality of being the dominant bull in a multiple-bull pasture can be physically traumatic.

As winter settles in, the time is right to recheck the bull pen in preparation for upcoming bull sales. Last fall, those bulls that suffered permanent wear and tear during the breeding season were let go. The bulls with obviously displaced joints or broken penises or those that were seriously injured were shipped away. Several bulls were given a chance to mend from an active breeding season and then rest to get ready for another season.

With the escalating price of bulls, producers do not want to part ways too soon with expensive bulls. Those bulls with a slight limp or that simply are out of condition need a second evaluation. The walk through the pen was good. Jotting some numbers down with a frozen pen proved to be the usual challenge. Writing seems like a simple task, but the 9 that becomes a 0 or the 0 that becomes a 6 can be life-threatening to a bull that gets his number wrongfully placed on the cull list.

There are a few strategies that can be used to keep the pen warm and good ink flowing, although a nice set of high-frequency electronic identification tags, appropriate reader and data pad would be super (nice Christmas present).

The 24 bulls were evaluated visually, but not all passed. Bull V162 was obvious. The fall limp on his left front foot had gotten worse, so there was no hope. Two coming 4-year-old bulls, V005 and V146, were simply going down in condition and ease of travel was not returning. Their gait was stiff and muscle mass was going. Although one does not generally have a large number of bulls to condition score, these two would be a 4. All three bulls did three years of service for the Dickinson Research Extension Center, but the time had come for us to part ways.

In reviewing the younger bulls, two of the coming 2-year-old bulls, 11R3 and 29S3, were growing massive frames. They were not bad bulls, but their frames were going up, so the decision was made to look for replacements.

The last bull was 709X. He is a yearling bull that was set aside this spring because of hip issues. Those issues still were present and there was no evidence that structural soundness was returning, so 709X was added to the cull list.

So we ended up with six bulls on the trailer and 18 bulls returned to the pens. Five bulls still are in question. Two are older bulls that still are very active and physically strong. Three coming 2-year-old bulls could use some better performance numbers.

As we all know, our wants are generally bigger than our pocketbooks. We can't always afford the bull we want. A few bull sales and the pen will be filled full of optimism for the 2013 calf crop. However, for now, let's get the 2012 calf crop delivered.

May you find all your ear tags.