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## BeefTalk: Breeding Systems are Coming of Age



**Cattle breeding systems are at the heart of long-term, cost-conscience, efficient beef production.**

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Pondering in life is good. So let's ponder this: "Can the beef industry produce terminal and replacement bulls?"

Historically, the answer is "yes." Through the decades, many breeding programs have been proposed to offer cattle producers the opportunity to implement cattle-breeding systems that involve terminal and replacement bulls.

Perhaps we should ask a slightly different question: "Does the beef industry fully utilize

### Images

#### Think About a Systems Approach

**Bull A** Produces calves with a 10% advantage as feeder calves (Cattle system based on calves as unit of production)

**Bull B** Produces calves with a 10% advantage as replacements (Cattle system based on acres as unit of production)

Think About a Systems Approach

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terminal and replacement bulls?" Now the response is muted, and a faint "maybe" can be heard.

Either way, bull selection begins with pondering. Is the beef operation going the right way? Did I buy the right bull or bulls? Do I need to make a slight correction in the bullpen? These are not easy ponderings.

Pondering starts at the local level. Do my cattle fit the demands of the ranch or farm? How do my cattle fit the numerous marketing opportunities? Am I too sensitive to constructive comments? Is the input fact or fiction?

Fact or fiction is important when pondering because not all input is fact. The producer is stuck in the middle, much like the net on a pingpong table, and can get confused and frustrated. Are the cattle right or wrong? Did I buy the right bull or the wrong bull?

Really, you can have two rights. If you divide the beef business into segments, the beef producer and the feeding industry may find themselves on opposite sides of the net. As the ball is bounced vigorously back and forth, the effort is to ponder what the right answer is to bull selection. Are efficient growth and carcass traits or cost-effective maternal and reproductive traits the desired outcome? Is one more important than the other?

The Dickinson Research Extension Center has

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spent several years playing pingpong, seeking the right answer. This year, after a three-year evaluation of cattle type integrated within production changes, a light came on. We have two answers.

We pondered the facts collected from the research. Larger cattle have a 10 percent advantage when a cattle system is evaluated based on calves as the unit of production, but when based on acres as the unit of production, smaller cattle have a 10 percent advantage in ranch revenue.

Now what do we do? For decades, cattle producers dedicated themselves to the improvement of cattle and the utilization of those cattle within production systems. These thoughts have many tentacles of impact, but a very important thought is opening the door to a systems approach to cattle production.

Cattle management data, performance data and genetic data continue to expand into the future by using new technology to analyze previously collected data along with new data. The results only strengthen the need to develop more cost- and market-driven beef production systems. In a nutshell, producers should capture the opportunity to select sires that will sire the correct breeding stock, followed by larger-scaled terminal beef production through efficient, low-cost cow herds.

That can be done. In other words, the answer is “yes” to the cattle feeder and the cow herd producer.

Once the industry decided that the walls would not cave in when Hereford bulls were mated to Angus cows or vice versa, the world of beef cattle systems was created. Life was simple: All a producer needed to do was take an established herd of purebred or straight-bred cows and mate with a different breed. The majority of producers at the time had Angus or Hereford, thus the cross.

So why bring up the past? The same situation is true today, although producers have more beef breeds from which to choose. This is a reminder of what followed those initial breed crossings.

Each breed had been tracked meticulously and parentage documentation was exhaustive, and some extraordinary results were becoming visible to the naked eye. Those “crossbred calves” excelled in growth. They were vigorous from birth throughout life. They withstood the stresses of the environment better and were just all-around better calves. And producers loved it.

What was so great? Producers started with smaller cows and bred them to terminal bulls and sold the calves. Or did they? Well, we all know what happened. Producers kept many of those terminal calves, and we still are living that story.

We just don't seem to know how to close the

chapter. But we do, if we want to. Cattle breeding systems, whether across breed or within breed, are at the heart of long-term, cost-conscious, efficient beef production.

With the current capacity to generate, evaluate and incorporate sire data across the industry, the chorus is getting louder. The comingling of breeds through crossbreeding and the data analysis of those breeds of cattle that may contribute to a designed system hint that perhaps the process already has started. Pondering in life is good. So let's ponder.

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](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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