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BeefTalk: Calves Pay the Bills, But the Cows Make the Bills

Cattle breeding systems are the key to long-term, cost-conscious, efficient beef production.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Breeding systems have goals, objectives and outcomes that reflect a total beef operation.

Today, dairy, swine and poultry breeding systems exist and many accomplish the operations' goals and objectives. Beef production, however, is often the exception.

The various stages of a good commercial beef breeding system are complex. The implementation takes years, even generations, to achieve, and then the implementation gets fuzzy. Most

Images

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

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)

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

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use of releases

The news media and others may use these news releases in their entirety. If the

producers assume buying the right bull is critical, and bull buying is most often the center of discussions when beef producers gather.

The genetic tools meant to be utilized to put growth on calves work. At the same time, cow selection and development enters the same discussion. Generally, the question pertains to developing heifers that are the female counterparts to those nice growth steers that were sent to the market.

Bull selection generally will focus on setting targets for growth. Birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight or associated indexes are evaluated and bulls selected. Calving ease usually is mentioned and carcass characteristics enter the discussion.

Despite years of expected progeny differences (EPDs), actual birth weight and ultrasound measurements are still prominent in many discussions. The bottom line: Producers like numbers they can touch and feel, numbers they can see and numbers that they can understand.

Breeding systems engage numbers, but often those numbers do not meet the previously noted desires. Anytime a visual concept is transferred to paper via numbers, the dropout rate increases. I am not judging this as good or bad, just acknowledging the reality.

Next, the discussion gets quieter. Perhaps the word "quiet" is not correct, but rather a late

question crops up: “How does one select for cow size, milk production, longevity and other female-associated traits?” That question produces a lot of blank stares around the room.

Genetic tools are available, but still the pause is long. This is where system development enters because seldom is the cow question asked as a stand-alone component of the beef herd. The question is asked as a consequence of the bulls selected for steer production.

So, another question: “Can the beef industry produce terminal and replacement bulls?”

Historically, the answer is “yes.” Breed associations provide terminal and maternal indexes, which will work. A challenge, however, is understanding the indexes and making a level of commitment that will allow the index to work.

Cattle selection is a long-term proposition. For decades, breeding programs have been proposed to offer cattle producers the opportunity to implement cattle-breeding systems that involve terminal and replacement bulls. But many breeding programs get set aside as new ideas and trends appear. Then more questions arise.

Another question, this one a slightly different question: Does the beef industry fully utilize terminal and maternal bulls? “Maybe” is the muted and faint response. Do producers actually target bred cows for more appropriate use as selected

cows for a designated terminal or replacement program?

Either way, bull selection begins with pondering. Back to the initial question, and more questions. Where are the beef industry breeding systems? Have we forgotten the need for breeding systems and the benefits that a good breeding system will bring? Are terminal or rotational breeding systems used to take advantage of breed complementarity and maximize available heterosis (crossing of unrelated breeds)?

Some would say today's breeds are complete and historic complementarity is an industry blend. Some would say heterosis is a nonfunctional historical aspect of breeds past. Well, that would not be true, but perception is strong in a visual-based industry.

I acknowledge that some producers have implemented breeding systems, but many have not. Sire selection generally introduces the need for goals, objectives and desired outcomes. However, sire selection alone is not a goal, objective or outcome. Sire selection is only a component of a well-designed breeding system and certainly a significant component.

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.

Remember, cow selection is system-based. Bull selection should complement the breeding objectives for the cows. Also remember, the calves pay the bills, but the cows make the bills.

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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Attachments



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