

## BeefTalk: Bull Selection for Moderate Growth?

Now may be the time to get a handle on the perpetual size race.

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I did some pondering as I traveled to and from recent commercial bull-selection workshops.

The travel time offered some time to ruminate on current news regarding the management of growth in the beef industry and related beef carcass size. Once home, dangling thoughts remain.

Bull-buying season is a great opportunity for beef producers to steer carcass size through sire selection, and as long as a producer is at the steering wheel, that is what one should do.

But first, what road does one want to be on? Even when one picks a road and arrives at an intersection, it seems to be rather congested. In fact, some days, the traffic light isn't even working, and all one gets is a lot of honking horns and lots of opinions.

This is very different from the day the bull quietly walked out to summer pasture to mate with the grazing cow herd. Perhaps we should "take the bull by the horns" and fix the issue, remembering we used genetics to remove the horns decades ago.

Can we not tackle the size issue as well? Maybe the time is right to get a handle on the perpetual size race. The cheer "May the fast-growing bull win the race!" needs to quiet down.

I apologize for using the exclamation point. Many producers know that bull buying is more than growth, but those growth traits are hard to resist.

At recent commercial bull-selection workshops, after reviewing historical bull-selection criteria, a common scenario often evolves. Producers use expected progeny difference values for weaning weight and yearling weight, but then revert to using actual birth weight based on their personal preference.

Note: Many producers still select on actual weight for birth, weaning and yearling weight. In a nutshell, this commercial bull-selection scenario is very common. Traits such as maternal milk and carcass quality randomly follow along because the auctioneer declares the bull sold.

This is not to say producers are not selecting on other traits; however, the growth traits are the focus, restricted primarily by the pocketbook. The opportunity to purchase sires from sires that excel in weaning and yearling growth, even with a limited pocketbook, is evident throughout the industry.

Recently, and in times previous to recent times, a foreboding media message appeared; it said that the beef industry needs to monitor carcass size. Bluntly put, cattle have gotten larger, and excessive carcass size is an issue.

At the same time, as one meanders through cattle producer gatherings, maternal cow size often is questioned. Once again, bluntly put, cows have gotten larger and producers are concerned with excessive cow size within cattle production units.

As the circle completes, continued emphasis on selection for growth only will perpetuate larger and larger cattle. I am not trying to be difficult, and I do get it. One could not have been in the beef business for the last few decades without realizing the desire and need to establish what one would call "efficient" cattle. Current cattle are a product of this massive movement within the industry.

Whether by design or not, the goal was fast-growth cattle, selecting for greater average daily gain, weight per day of age, weaning weight, yearling weight, harvest weight, carcass weight and other traits contributing to the development of beef mass. The main constraint to the accomplishment of the current beef population was simply time and the long generational interval of cattle.

Think about how the concepts of "growth" and "excellence" have been connected. Produced education supported the ongoing hypothesis that increased growth was improvement. The concept of improving industry efficiency meant improved growth and has been embedded doctrinally in the industry.

Well, perhaps the industry has arrived at an imposed finish line, even if the finish line was not ever set. Is the time here to rethink that concept and encompass the complexity of more traits? More than anything, modified selection goals and tools, once implemented, will appease the need to expand economically balanced traits within the industry.

But first let's accept the concept that the growth goal is achieved. Moving forward, the challenge is to first recognize perpetual-focused selection of those sires that excel in growth traits for the purpose of expanding commercial cattle growth curves may need to be altered.

Does the commercial cattle industry continue to produce a product that must be modified to fit desired specs? Or does the commercial cattle industry seek genetics that will produce a product that will fit the desired specs without significant modification?

The bulls that will buffer growth within the cow populations, expand efficient growth during the growing and finishing phase and, once again, buffer carcass size do exist. The industry has to want to change. That is not a negative statement, but it is a difficult statement.

May you find all your ear tags.

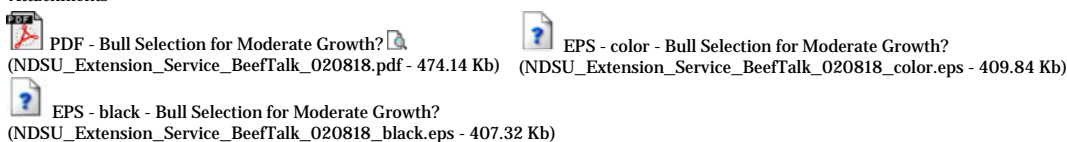
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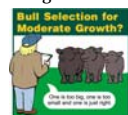
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Attachments



Images



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