

Searching for the “right kind” of cattle

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With current feeder calf supplies very tight, it would lead many to believe that cattle feeders are searching for any calf they can get their hands on to fill empty pens. However, a recent discussion between Beef® Magazine¹ and Tom Brink of JBS Five Rivers Cattle Feeding indicated that this was not the case. Even with cattle supplies very low, feeders are still looking for the “right” type of cattle to fill their empty pens. It is very important that stocker operators and cow/calf producers strive to produce the kind of cattle that feeders want and produce the kind of beef consumers are searching for in their grocery case.

First and foremost, cattle must have the genetic potential to perform. Although as a whole the beef industry has improved the performance potential of our nation’s cowherd, there are still estimates that 25 to 30% of cattle on feed still do not have the genetic potential to reach acceptable performance levels. Improving genetic potential for performance begins with selection in our cow herds, and within a cow/calf operation sire selection gives the greatest opportunity for genetic improvement. This means using available tools, such as EPDs and genetic markers, to select bulls which will improve growth potential and carcass quality. This means selecting bulls with known pedigree and genetic information. Although it may be tempting to skimp on the price of a herd sire, it is important to remember how wide reaching his impact will be. If replacement females are retained from that bull’s progeny, and that bull is used for four years or more, his impact could easily last a decade. Therefore, purchasing a bull at the local sale barn with no idea of his history, or the reason he was being sold by his original owner, is not a wise choice.

When asked what the ideal finished weight is for steers, Brinks¹ responded that a “good target is 1,350 to 1,400 lbs.” However, it is important to remember that there is a fine line between a steer with an ideal finished weight of 1,450 lbs. and a steer that finishes at 1,500 lbs., and hangs a carcass discounted as too big to fit the box receiving a discount. Determining an ideal combination of genetics to produce the ideal feeder calf is tricky, as cattle in the US are raised in a wide variety of environmental conditions with a wide variety of goals in mind. It is important to find the right balance of traits that best fits your goals as a beef producer.

Second, animal health remains an important issue for feedyard managers, perhaps the biggest issue they face on a day to day basis. For feedyards, the “right kind” of cattle are healthy cattle with low morbidity and mortality rates. These cattle have usually been through a good health program, and premiums are often paid for good health programs. Although as a whole, the beef industry has improved health management practices in recent years; there is still room for improvement. Evidence of the cost of illness was shown in recent analysis of calves in the Mississippi Farm to Feedlot Program². Healthy calves netted over \$100 net return from finishing greater than calves treated twice or more. This increase in profit was due not only to a greater live value in the healthy animals, but also due to decreased medication costs.

Preconditioning programs are widely accepted as beneficial in reducing sickness in calves, and generally ensure that calves are weaned for a minimum amount of time (typically 30 to 45 days), vaccinated, de-wormed, castrated, dehorned, and bunk broke. However, there is often a disconnect in information flow between various segments of the beef industry. Often when a load of calves arrives at a feedyard, they often do so with no health or nutritional background. It is important to remember when selling cattle, that a premium for a good health program cannot

be realized if the buyer does not know the history of the cattle.

Advances in knowledge of Bovine Respiratory Disease (BRD), continuously uncover new factors which may affect the immune system, and the animal's susceptibility to BRD. Many factors may affect immunity, and may occur pre- or post-weaning or may be innate to the animal. Preconditioning programs often try to control many of these factors. Providing proper nutrition, minimizing stress, and building immunity through vaccinations are all important parts of any preconditioning program.

With cattle supplies at their lowest in almost 60 years, it is perhaps more important now than ever the beef producers work together to produce the "right kind" of cattle. This starts with the cow/calf producer selecting the "right kind" of genetics to improve performance and carcass quality. Both cow/calf and stocker operators are responsible for implementing good animal health programs to ensure that cattle are healthy when they enter the feedyard, and conveying the health and nutritional status of the animals they sell to potential buyers. Feedyards are responsible for keeping those cattle healthy, and feeding them to their ideal weight and condition. Ultimately every segment of the beef industry is responsible for fulfilling the consumer's demand for beef during this time of low supplies.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit msucares.com/livestock/beef.

¹Rutherford, Burt. "Here's what feeders say they want in cattle". Accessed July 10, 2012. <http://beefmagazine.com/beef-quality/heres-what-feeders-say-they-want-cattle>

²Parish, J.A., T. Smith, R.C. Vann. 2012 Mississippi Farm to Feedlot Program 13-year summary: Effects of steer age and morbidity on feedlot performance and carcass traits. Prof. Anim. Sci. 28:158-165