

The Future - Proven Bulls

By Kris Ringwall, North Dakota State University, Extension Beef Specialist

There is nothing more relevant or futuristic in the beef business than a good discussion about buying bulls. This involves a process of selection that impacts the foundation of individual beef herds and the essence of the beef industry. As the discussion deepens, the concept of proven bulls has to evolve.

Purchasing semen from bulls that have proven themselves in regards to the quality of cattle is easily evident within producer herds. A bigger issue is that the quality of beef raised and made available to the consumer is absolutely critical.

Proven bulls, not just bulls are the key ingredient. Proven bulls assure that the right pieces are in the mix to allow management to fine-tune the ultimate product, beef. The industry's reputation and future depend on these bulls.

Although not always noted in cattle discussions, the fundamental principle producers must accept is that cattle belong to producers and beef belongs to consumers. The magnitude of that statement really stands out, and should stand out as producers look to the future.

Each year brings new and exciting thoughts and promises along with a reasonable dose of reality. The future is really now. Those thoughts, promises and projected reality were encapsulated very well in an electronic journal (Volume 21, No. 3, 2006) entitled Choices (www.choicesmagazine.org) published by the American Agricultural Economics Association.

The discussion was pointed. In the future, promises will only outweigh reality if as cattle producers, we grab 'the bull by the horns' and sit up, listen and change. The series of articles identified issues that will ultimately shape our industry and included discussions on markets, structure, and competition; value of integrated markets and consumer demand; global competitiveness; environmental concerns and regulations; community concerns and labor; food safety and animal health; and the welfare and care of animals.

All of these issues sum up to one thing; the beef business is simply no longer breed'em, feed'em and eat'em. If there is a common thread to all the issues, it is individual producer responsibility.

The future will mandate aggressive producer engagement in business concepts and managerial analytical techniques that are going to assure a position within a very competitive, worldwide consumer market. Much that happens on our individual operations must feed into a larger system and even the large systems we feed into, ultimately feed into even larger systems.

The ability to cash flow may be very local, income minus expenses, but the ability to survive as a viable beef operation on into the future really needs to be much broader. The opportunities for the future start this spring, following calving, when the cows are rebred.

The bull must fit the industry. The bull needs to have proven data that fits not only producer expectations, but meets strong consumer demands. There really is no room for mistakes.

The product ultimately placed on a consumer's plate is a product of a bull, a bull that was evaluated, reevaluated and ultimately selected as the sire of beef. The beef is destined to arrive at a targeted palate that has, as an end result, a very personal experience of taste and flavor, in other words, a great eating experience. Cattle producers are in the beef business, but we do need to remind ourselves of the significance of that statement.

The future is the responsibility of all. For beef producers, now is the time to visit with your local genetics company and key seed stock producers. This planning can arrange for bulls that will bring assurance to the breeding program, which can offer assurance to the production system and ultimately place quality beef on consumer's plates.