

News Column

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Producers focus on herd sire selection

Spring breeding season has arrived, and many cattle producers are likely thinking about selecting their next herd sire. This one decision could affect their profitability drastically, and with the stress of calving season, it is easy to get lost in sire information and make an investment that could be detrimental to the bottom line.

It is important for cattle producers to think about their operation's breeding objective and goals. Producers need to evaluate their current herd performance attributes, and consider where they are performing adequately as well as areas of needed improvement.

Preparation before purchase

Like most things, preparation is crucial to bull buying. It is recommended that producers think about their marketing endpoint and put selection pressure on those areas.

If marketing or maintaining replacement heifers, for example, bulls with strong maternal predictors would be desired. In this case, producers should focus on expected progeny differences (EPDs) such as calving ease, milk and cow energy value. If marketing calves at weaning, growth EPDs should be the focus. If marketing calves on a grid, bulls with desired carcass predictors are the best choice.

In addition to the endpoint focus, producers are encouraged to write down their immediate and long-term goals. Focusing on herd rebuilding, resource limitations and retaining replacement heifers might need to be thought out. Choosing between cross and straight breeding should also be part of the selection process.

If producers are thinking of or are in a crossbreeding system, it is encouraged to develop a planned system. Don't make a decision on short notice – you'll pay for that for a number of years.

The decisions made now on buying bulls will have a lasting impact on your cow herd until at least 2025. The first-born daughters of bulls will grow a couple of years and be in production likely six, seven or eight calving cycles.

If planning to attend a bull sale, make sure to get a sale catalog as soon possible. Use percentile tables and breed averages while going through the sale catalog, and find animals that excel in the traits identified through the breeding objective.

If buying Angus bulls, for example, search online for ‘Angus percentile table,’ and that will be a useful tool to evaluate how close to average or extreme an individual bull is for a particular trait within the population.

Producers should make a list of suitable bulls that is about three times longer than how many bulls needed. This is helpful in case bulls of interest sell for a price that is out of budget.

Live inspection important

With list in hand, producers can use days leading up to sale day to inspect and sort through the bulls in person.

If you can go a week or week and a half early, you’ll have more leisure time going through the bulls, talking with the seedstock vendors about their program and maybe go look at cows if you’re thinking of buying a bull to make replacement heifers. Try to get a feel for how that cow herd is managed. I encourage you to find one that mimics your own nutrition and management strategy.

Bull buying is a significant investment for producers, and no one knows the bulls better than the seller. Producers should take the opportunity to get recommendations from that person.

When examining bulls on the list previously ranked on performance data, focus heavily on structure. Foot and leg structure of bulls is crucial to their longevity in the herd. Also, updated data will likely be available on sale day. It is important to make sure all bulls on the list still meet your requirements.

Once you’ve gone through the phenotypic evaluation and knocked off bulls that don’t fit for either body condition or feet and leg structure, find the sale order. Often, the sale order is indicative of which bulls the seedstock vendor thinks are the most valuable. Take your list of bulls and the sale order, and make a new list. Put them in priority order based on your evaluation reflective of the order you would purchase them in one column. Next to that, reorder the list in sale order.

If a bull is at the top of the list for priority and sale order, the producer should consider bidding aggressively on him. On the other hand, if a lower priority bull sells early, the producer should consider buying him only if he is at the right price. If that bull sells out of budget, the producer can let him pass and consider others on the list.

More information can be found by typing into your internet browser KSU beef breeding and genetics.

Information provided by Bob Weaber, K-State cow-calf specialist.