Longevity in the Beef Herd

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Longevity in the cowherd is perhaps something we don’t think about when we make breeding decisions each year. The functionality of beef cattle is a combination of so many traits. You may ask why this is important. Let’s think about it. The investment you have in a heifer from the time she is weaned until she is in production is very expensive. Keeping an open heifer or buying one is without doubt a long term investment. In my scenario I am assuming that heifers are calving at 2 years of age. From the time a heifer calf is born until she is in production and weans a calf is on average around 30 to 32 months old. Think about the fact that all of your investments and inputs are tied up for this long before you get a return! With this in mind you need to assure that your animals will be in production for a full productive life cycle.

When one thinks about the factors that affect longevity you have to think of sound feet and legs, functional teat and udder that supplies adequate milk for her calf, eye problems, fleshing ability and reproductive performance. Many of these traits have low heritability estimates such as reproduction. So, how are we as producers to select for cattle that will stay in our cow herd for a full productive life (10 years on average). You may say that most of my cows go out of production at 6 to 7 years of age. If this is the case you need to ask yourself why.

If you analyze your herd you may find that when a cow is no longer profitable you will find a common theme. Is it due to cows that lack fleshing ability and reproductive performance? If this is the case you need to analyze your nutritional environment that your cows perform under. If you have a minimal input operation and have cattle that are made of breed combinations that require a higher quality forage and management program then you may have a problem. The cattle in this scenario could milk too heavy or are large framed cattle that just need better forages and supplemental nutrition during their productive lifetime. I can’t stress enough that you match your genetics to your environment. Additional input costs, regardless of reason increases your production cost. Every operation is different, so do not hesitate in matching your cattle genetics to your nutritional offering.

If you are losing cattle early in their productive life due to bad feet or udders then this is mostly due to genetics of the cow herd and the bulls that sired them. This too will lower the productive life span of your cows. When selecting your heifers to keep and buying your herd bulls make sure they are sound footed and has good leg set to assure longevity and the ability to roam and graze. When you purchase from reputable breeders you assure yourself that the animals you buy are of good breeding stock that do not or should not possess these problems. True breeders of livestock want to make improvements for their herd and for you the customer.

I mentioned fleshing ability earlier in the article and I can’t stress this enough. The best way to decide if cattle fit your environment is to appraise your cow herd. Go out and look at the cows that are holding their flesh under your pasture situation and producing a good heavy calf for you every year. Then identify the cows that calve late in the calving season. Many times you will find these cows are harder doing. Cattlemen need to remember if cattle are too thin at calving the first thing that the cow “is programed” to do is provide milk to her newborn calf. Therefore reproductive performance is secondary until that cow is gaining weight after calving. The time for that harder fleshing cow to return to “heat” will be prolonged. Let me caution however, if the majority of the cow herd is thin and late coming into heat then this is due most likely to nutrition alone and not genetics. If you have a good nutrition/mineral program and the majority of your cattle are fleshing well and raising heavy calves, then I recommend that the thinner harder doing cows be replaced with heifers from the better cows within the herd.

One thing I have not mentioned that will end the productive life of an animal faster than anything for many producers is disposition. Animals that are aggressive, aggravating or just flat mean should be eliminated. The repair cost to facilities by aggressive animals is not worth it, but more importantly are hospital and doctor bills are not worth it for sure!! Life is too short to put up with hard to handle cattle. Cattle should be profitable and enjoyable!

Let’s change perspective yet keeping in mind longevity. Would you buy a car that was only going to last 3 to 4 years? How about a washer dryer for your home that only last 2 to 3 years? A tractor that only lasts for 5 to 6 years? The list goes on. The same holds true for cattle. Cattle must have a long and productive life for you to maximize your profit on a per unit basis.

In order to eliminate some of these problems from your herd I suggest you work closely with your county Extension agent or a successful cattle breeder you respect. These relationships can help you locate cattle genetics that will boost your bottom line and hopefully keep you in the cattle business longer. When you are in the business for the long run so should your cattle be in it for the long run.