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DO YOU WANT PROGRESS OR CHANGE IN CATTLE BREEDING?

Aug 19, 2014 by Burke Teichert in Strategic Planning For The Ranch

In my lifelong learning, I've relied on many sources but the most meaningful help has come from two of them:

- Experts from the academic world who have the confidence of their peers and their students, have learned to work and communicate effectively with farmers and ranchers, and whose work addresses economically important questions.
- Farmers and ranchers who are possibility thinkers, pay attention to the science, learn from each other, want to know the truth and adopt practices and careful decisions that make them more profitable.

It is from this perspective (paying attention to the science and observing the practices of profitable commercial ranchers) that I make the following observations on cattle breeding and the way we select and cull.

- Years of observation suggest that the most profitable ranches have cow herds that are at, or just slightly above, average for most economically important traits. The most profitable herds also have lower-than-average milk production. Trying to push a herd beyond average for an environment usually comes with a cost in feed or stocking rate.
- There are many genetic antagonisms (unintended consequences) which can vary from almost imperceptible at first to fairly significant.
- We can make rapid genetic change, but it doesn't always yield economic progress. Looking at the dairy industry as an example, we see that, if you select primarily for milk, you will get lots of milk. You will also get significant inbreeding as a result of extensive use of artificial insemination (AI) to closely related sires, poor fertility, poor survivability, many health issues and lots of cost. To a lesser extent, I think that focused selection in beef cattle for high growth and carcass grade has yielded some of the same effects.
- Please understand that EPDs and genomically enhanced EPDs work, but too many people have used EPDs as a tool to strive for "maximums." Maximum is seldom, if ever, the most profitable course.

IMPROVEMENT CARRIES A COST

Most improvement in performance comes with a cost. Often, that cost is in the reduction of performance in another trait, a reduction in stocking rate, or higher feed costs, each of which can take several years to become obvious. We need to be sure the added revenue is greater than the added cost.

- The use of AI, embryo transfer and today's genomically enhanced EPDs, without great care, can lead to a significant increase in inbreeding for the most popular breeds.

• If cell division to form egg and sperm happened for each gene pair individually, I would not have so much concern. But cells divide a chromosome at a time, which means that to get the good stuff on a particular chromosome, you will also have to take whatever else happens to be on that chromosome – the possible antagonisms.

- The relatively new study of "epigenetics" suggests that environmental factors may turn genes on or off. I think one might further suppose that environmental factors can reduce, enhance or even modify the effect of genes. Genes also have effects on each other – most of which are unknown and unmeasured. That's just the way complex systems work.
- Many geneticists and a number of seedstock breeders are promoting the use of selection indices. The index becomes a composite of the "economically relevant traits."

In putting the index together, each trait receives a weighting based on heritability and economic importance. From environment to environment, the relationship of heritability from trait to trait is seldom the same (though it may be close). The relative economic importance of each trait can also vary from place to place and from time to time. There is just enough skeptic in me (I call it being careful) to wonder if the economic weighting for each trait in the index was done correctly for my objectives.

Being a "systems thinker," considering the forgoing observations and recognizing that the use of EPDs can move us toward or away from our profit objectives, I want to

suggest the following combination of management and genetics as a method of herd improvement:

- Cull cows that aren't doing what you want them to do. Don't expect careful culling to be a big genetic trend changer. It won't be. But, it will keep your herd cleaned up, functional and easy to manage. It will help you avoid keeping offspring from the poorest few. I have noticed that, when culling for unacceptable disposition or performance, you only have to remove a few each year to keep problems at a low level and to make life easier and much more enjoyable.
- Use low-cost development and a very short breeding season for yearling heifers, exposing significantly more than will be needed. If you start with heifers that can be developed at a low cost and get pregnant in less than 30 days, you will have better cows raising better calves and with better rebreeding rates. Naturally you will sort off the real misfits before breeding.

This is more management than genetics, but it will give much quicker bottom-line results. This is written from the perspective of one who produces his own replacement heifers. However, if your better alternative is to buy bred cows, you should try to find a producer who comes close to following these recommendations for your source of bred cows.

You must depend on your seedstock provider(s) to make most of the genetic changes you desire in your herd. I want my bull provider to:

- Judiciously use the genetic tools at his disposal.
- Produce and help me select bulls that will produce good mother cows – moderate in size and milk production, and that will work in my environment and with my management. He needs to be a low-cost, low input operator with his cowherd. Since I don't pamper my cows, I don't want him to pamper his. Sure, I want good steer calves, but I want mother cows first. A good mother will usually produce an acceptable steer and do it with low cost.
- Keep accurate individual records and report 100% of the records to his breed association. I don't like the problems or inferior performance to be excluded from the records.
- Help me maintain a reasonable level of heterosis in my herd (somewhere between 65 and 80% of maximum or

F1 heterosis). This means I will either need more than one seedstock supplier or the chosen supplier will be able to provide genetics from at least three breeds.

- Not follow popular fads without good justification.
- Be satisfied with slow, sustained, balanced progress. Many years of watching has shown that, when you try to move one trait too far or too fast, you usually give up something else that is good. Balance is very important.
- Beware of, and be honest about, genetic antagonisms as they manifest themselves. While I'm sure I've observed many cases of bigger mature size and higher milk being negatively correlated with reproduction, I also see a negative correlation with stocking rate, which is not a genetic correlation. This kind of relationship between a genetic trait and a non-genetic effect needs to be considered.

We have great tools; but, because of genetic and environmental antagonisms, I think we need to be satisfied with slow change in a balanced approach – maintaining or slowly improving genetics for cowherd productivity. Any genetic change that results in more feed cost, a reduction in stocking rate, or a reduction in reproduction should be questioned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Burke Teichert was born and raised on a family ranch in western Wyoming and earned a B.S. in ag business from Brigham Young University and M.S. in ag economics from University of Wyoming. His work history includes serving as a university faculty member, cattle reproduction specialist, and manager of seven cattle ranches for Deseret Land and Cattle.

Teichert retired in 2010 as vice president and general manager with AgReserves, Inc., where he was involved in seven major ranch acquisitions in the U.S. and the management of a number of farms and ranches in the U.S. as well as Canada and Argentina.

In retirement, he is a consultant and speaker, passing on his expertise in organizing ranches to be very cost-effective and efficient, with minimal labor requirements. His column on strategic planning for the ranch appears monthly in BEEF magazine.

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