



**Burke
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Selecting the right bull

You cull cows to keep your herd “cleaned up” and managerially efficient. In the process, you also have a positive effect on herd fertility, health and environmental adaptation

health. Bull selection can result in rapid change. However, change may not always result in progress. In fact, I suggest that a lot of change in cattle growth rate has been more than offset economically by reductions in stocking rate, fertility and health.

The result has been more time spent doctoring cattle, lower conception rates and/or higher feed bills, and fewer pounds produced per acre. Because the calves are bigger, they bring less per pound. Therefore, we now sell fewer pounds per acre at a lower price per pound.

On many ranches, the No. 1 profit determinant is the ratio of grazed feed to fed feed. Once you have gotten over doing a lot of feeding, stocking rate becomes the No. 1 determinant of profit; and stocking rate is determined by cow size, along with grazing and pasture management. Next comes herd fertility. Then, in a group, come marketing, cows-per-person ratio and herd health problems.

Consider all that when making bull selections:

- **Cull the right cow.** Why would I want to buy a bull born to a cow that I would have culled at my ranch? Go through your cull cri-

teria and ask if the mother of “that bull” would still be in your herd.

- **Size and milking ability.** If you want cows that can graze most of the year and get pregnant early in the breeding season — and if you want to wean more pounds per acre by running more smaller cows with less milking ability — you will want to select bulls with less mature size and lower milk EPDs.

To maximize pounds produced per acre and at the same time keep supplemental feed cost at a minimum, I want cows to be as small as they can be and still produce a feeder calf that will be acceptable to the market. I know feeders and packers seem to want them bigger and bigger, but you need to stay in business first.

- **Heterosis.** Carcass traits are highly heritable. Growth traits are moderately heritable. Milk is less heritable; and fertility, health and longevity are considered to be lowly heritable.

But because carcass traits are highly heritable, they don’t respond much to heterosis, while other traits do. The rest of the traits respond, with the more highly heritable having a lesser response and the more lowly heritable having a greater response. Optimum heterosis is most likely different for each situation, but I want a significant level of heterosis in every cow. Heterosis will significantly enhance fertility and health while slightly

increasing milk and growth.

- **Disposition.** As an industry, we have made great progress across many breeds. Every bull should be carefully scrutinized for disposition.

- **Growth and carcass.** Improving growth rates and carcass traits is desirable as long as the negative consequences don’t overbalance the positives. When you make sure that the bulls you buy will produce the kind and size of cows you want, you then need to move carefully and cautiously to get the desired growth and carcass results without undoing much of the good you have accomplished.

I think it can be done, but carefully and slowly. Genomics and heterosis, if they can become compatible, could help move growth and carcass forward faster without undoing progress in the other traits.

One of the good decisions a commercial producer can make is the choice of a seedstock producer. Find someone whose breeding objectives mirror your own, who operates in a similar environment, can help you benefit from heterosis, can understand your objectives and help you select the right bull. ■

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