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Ultrasound Matters

Producers who make data based decisions see profit at the end

Carcass 101

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How important is ultrasound data to a producer making genetic selections?

"The only way to make decisions is to look at performance data and ultrasound data," says Blake Crawford of Adair, Iowa. Crawford runs a commercial beef operation he describes as 'farrow to finish.' "If you have animals that are not measuring up, you have to rely on ultrasound to identify the reason and improve future generations."

For Crawford, it's all about herd improvement. "If you have a herd that's below average for marbling or rib eye area, you need to improve those traits and increase those numbers," he says. "So you're going to make your replacement decisions based on that need. And you're going to use ultrasound to do that. It's the only way there is to have a look at those animals and their potential."

That knowledge not only determines which animals Crawford keeps, it gives him more confidence in his matings. "I'm not going to cull an otherwise good heifer or cow because she's low in a particular trait," he explains. "I'm going to AI her to a bull that makes up for that deficiency. I do that for the future of the herd. If you can cut that difference in half, you've helped your herd."

Richard McClung, of Wehrmann Angus in New Market, Virginia, agrees. "I've seen the tremendous improvement ultrasound has made in our herd and the herds of our customers," he says. "I believe in ultrasound totally." At Wehrmann's, every bull and cow is scanned with ultrasound, and has been since 1985. The operation sells around 300 bulls each year, nearly 200 of them to large ranches in the western U.S. that own their stock from conception to harvest. "We get reports from these people of the difference that data makes," says McClung.

McClung also uses DNA profiling and finds it substantiates the ultrasound generated EPDs.

"These are unimpeachable sources," says McClung.

And that's why Crawford insists ultrasound data is critical when buying a bull, the starting point for herd improvement. "I wouldn't buy one without it," he says, adding the data can sometimes lead to the unexpected. He uses for example a herd sire with a .64 EPD for marbling. "He is a true outlier," says Crawford. "Neither parent was known for high marbling, but he is and it is highly heritable from him. We never would have known that without ultrasound."

It's a phenomenon frequently found with the use of ultrasound.

"Some of the ones you think aren't that good are the ones that have Choice calves," says Terry Hedeman of Lockwood, Missouri. Hedeman, too, relies heavily on data when bull shopping.

"We look at it hard," says Hedeman. For bulls he likes to see carcass merit EPDs of at least .3 for %IMF and no less than .12 for REA, with no heavy backfat.

Mostly he likes how the data helps keep him in the middle of the road. "You can't just look at one thing," says Hedeman. "You have to look at the whole picture. When you sell to the feedlots, they make you look at good numbers all around. We've had steers with a 20-21 inch ribeye that wouldn't grade Choice because they weren't marbled."

Joe Mayer of Guymon, Oklahoma, agrees with the need for data when buying a bull to sire profitable calves. "We use the heck out of it," says Mayer of ultrasound generated performance data. He relies heavily on the information to select the ten or so bulls he buys each year. "In fact, it's about all I use."

"Before the bull sale, we go through the catalogue," continues Mayer. "We have minimums for a set of EPDs and those that don't meet the standards we mark off and go on. We'll cut the field of around 400-500 down to 70 or 80 the first round." Mayer says they prefer bulls with .95 marbling and .76 REA. "But nothing is perfect," he adds, "if it was, I couldn't afford it."

He uses the catalogue numbers to assign possible purchases to A, B, and C-lists, assigning a value of what he is willing to pay. "Even a C-list animal has some value," says Mayer. "That's one I might use on older cows, or environments where we don't watch them as close – if I can get him for the right price."

A-list bulls on the other hand, are heavily utilized. Through AI and embryo transplant, along with a cycle of natural service, Mayer will get 60-70 calves out of a top-line bull selected for his performance potential.

Using data to assign bulls to various elements of his 1,200-cow herd works for Mayer, who also feeds out his steers and sells them on the U.S. Premium Beef grid. “It may seem like witchcraft to some, but ultrasound data is a pretty accurate measurement of a bull’s capabilities,” says Mayer. “If you don’t believe it works, feed some cattle.”

“I’ve seen the difference it has made in the bottom line of the people who buy our bulls,” adds McClung. “We’ll continue to use ultrasound as a measure. I wouldn’t do it without it. Producers need to just do it – it works.”