



## Are you on track?

*By Steve Suther*

Biology says it takes two years from the day you breed cows till their calves can be harvested for beef or join the breeding herd to calve as two-year-olds. Decisions before, after and during any two-year span can make a big difference.

Let's not get too dramatic, because you can flip a coin on some calls and stay the course. You have to know what counts, which calls add up to the vision that controls genetic direction.

Bull selection may have been just a week or two prior, but usually months and often years before any particular breeding season. Your expectations in picking a bull may have been bolstered with selection tools, and maybe you can quote DNA results to justify the choice, but you don't really know until you see what happens in your herd, your environment.

If he's been in use for at least two years, you may have some idea as to how much his influence improves the herd.

Or not. Bulls can disappoint, especially when they are not registered or backed by a suite of expected progeny differences from a breed association. Picking one like that would not fit the big picture for herd improvement. Assuming you do have numbers, there's a short window of time to see that second set of baby calves while you study yearling results on the first set.

Do you really want a third calf crop like those? Usually, the answer is yes and usually, it's the default. If you don't really want more of those calves, look for alternatives. Your seedstock supplier may have a demo available for lease.

Keep evaluating progeny as heifers join the herd. Do they calve unassisted and allow you to work calves without trying to hurt you? Do their calves seem likely to improve the herd? Are feedlot performance and carcass traits better than average. If not, those should add to your list of reasons to sell a bull even though still physically sound.

As you select replacements and keep records, evaluate them by sire group. It may take three or four years to discover a certain bull's daughters don't perform as you want, but whenever that comes to light, you could be ahead to cull them all, root and branch.

Some say it takes 15 or 20 years to build a cow herd, and if you use enough early indicators like DNA testing, that may be true today. But the most important factor in how long it takes is the manager's long-term goals for the herd. Does that vision endure for several decades? For a lifetime?

If the guiding vision goes through one big shift, it could be the key to greatness. Several significant shifts, however, may not allow enough progress for excellence. The herd can provide satisfaction, entertainment and education as you study the results of the abrupt turns, but greatness takes commitment to a vision at some point. A persistent vision from one who got on the right track early on, then kept monitoring the goal while selecting for more of what worked best.

Next time in *Black Ink*<sup>®</sup> Miranda Reiman will look to see if we're there yet. Questions? Call 330-465-0820 or e-mail [steve@certifiedangusbeef.com](mailto:steve@certifiedangusbeef.com).

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