



Tools that work

By Miranda Reiman

You need to hang a picture on a wall. As you grab a hammer and swing, I bet you never find yourself thinking, “I sure hope this hammer will work.”

You’ve selected the right tool for the job, you know how it functions and you’re confident it will deliver the intended results.

Yet in the cattle community, I hear tool skeptics all the time.

Take EPDs, the expected progeny differences calculated by breed associations. “Those are just numbers. They don’t tell you what the animal is going to do in the real world.”

I’ve worked as an ag journalist for more than a decade and every single rancher I interview who has made significant, directional progress gives a big portion of that credit to studying the EPDs.

No matter what trait or suite of traits you’re trying to improve, they provide a clear roadmap. EPDs help you determine ways to avoid problems and help you design exactly the kind of herd you want.

They’ve been studied and accuracy improved for decades. In many cases, these calculations have millions of records feeding into their algorithms. With the addition of genomic information, the figures are more precise than ever.

“The EPDs and indexes are not just numbers on a page in a sale catalog; they’re very accurate tools that people can use,” an expert told me when I asked about a recent demonstration project.

The study was designed to prove the value of a genetic value index that incorporates EPDs in estimating end-product merit. There was a predicted \$187.38 difference between the bottom group and the top.

In real life, fed the same ration at the same yard to the same backfat endpoint, there was a \$215.47 spread. A big part was due to the quality grade differences, where the group with the highest

predicted carcass value was 100% high Choice and Prime, compared to the lower group that had zero Primes and just 52% premium Choice.

Simply put, the tools work.

There are other time-honored improvement strategies that would fall into this category of well-researched, widely tested, proven technologies.

I still hear people say, “For all the labor, hassle and money spent on synchronization, there’s no way AI [artificial insemination] makes sense.”

Yet, in talking to a rancher whose entire steer crop made 80% Prime, I discovered a big key to success: near three-quarters of the 1,000 cows were AI bred. There’s the benefit of having access to better genetics, but beyond that, study after study shows early-born calves make more money than the stragglers. The less variation in calves, the more interested the buyers.

Research from a few years ago shows in a herd of 50 cows, with all costs figured in, AI adds more than \$7,000 over the course of five years. That didn’t even take into consideration the potential value of better carcass merit.

I’m a proponent of checking facts and scrutinizing decisions, but if a proven technology claims to save you time or money, or add to your bottom line, and it actually does? Don’t be too surprised.

Sometimes it is just this simple: the tools work as intended.

Next time in *Black Ink*[®] Steve Suther will weigh an ounce of prevention. Questions? E-mail mreiman@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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