



Use your head

By Miranda Reiman

Many have bought or otherwise taken ownership of a “fixer-upper.” Maybe it wasn’t love at first sight, but you saw the potential and had a few ideas going in.

That’s how it was when we bought an old farmhouse, then spent most of the last decade trying to update it.

Progress seems slow, as everything takes cash. Even the simplest improvements, like a couple cans of paint and new flooring can easily stretch beyond \$1,000 and I won’t even get into the budget for our complete kitchen remodel.

When it comes to home improvements, you can’t make quick progress without a large investment.

In the cattle business, there are lots of things that would fall into that category, like putting in a new line of feed bunks for backgrounding pens or expanding acreage. But not everything that increases profit takes a bank loan or dipping into reserves.

Think about genetic selection and bull power. You’re going to invest in something to keep the calves coming each year, but the same money can fall short or supercharge progress in traits like carcass quality and feed efficiency. The difference mostly comes down to an outlay of a free resource: brain power.

I suppose I’ve always known this. Pulling up to a ranch visit, I make no correlation between condition of outbuildings and expectations for the herd I’m about to see. A brand new pickup does not mean anything in terms of cattle genetics.

But it became crystal clear this spring as I visited with a cattleman who had two and half times more premium Choice qualifying cattle in just three years’ time after taking over the family herd. Primes went from zero to 35% of the steer crop.

“We did this all with \$13 straws of semen,” he told me. Later the rancher remarked on his bargain-priced, used squeeze chute and how the heifer development pens also double for growing steers.

The biggest expenditure came in the form of study. Researching the traits of value, consulting sire catalogs, visiting with those who had made the kind of progress he wanted to achieve.

You have to make hay while the sun shines, and it's easy to notice the shed that needs shingles or change the tractor oil on schedule while you put off that reading, thinking and debating for another day. You need to make it a priority on your to-do list.

Sometimes the consulting and studying can show areas where you would be ahead to spend more money. Maybe a discount vaccination program costs you more than you're saving. Maybe that cull salebarn bull set your genetic improvement back more than you thought.

Improvement does not necessitate across-the-board increases in expenditures.

Focused analysis can also show the places where you're currently overspending. Maybe you could find a cheaper alternative feedstuff or a reliable, used piece of equipment instead of new.

To make gains in performance or carcass quality, in mothering ability or calf health, or any number of areas you're looking at, you may just have to schedule some time to study.

Brian power could be your most valuable resource.

Next time in *Black Ink*[®] Steve Suther will look at transitions and planning. Questions? E-mail mreiman@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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