



Replacement strategies

Are you looking for a few good cows? Statistically, historically, most beef producers at this point in the cattle cycle are thinking about expanding their herds. Whether you plan to join the crowd or sell females to them, remember there are only a few choices: Keep heifers to develop and breed, or buy outside females, open, bred or calved pairs.

Every producer must cross that decision bridge every year, just to maintain stable numbers in the herd. On the average, producers cull 17% of the national cowherd annually, and in the big picture, heifers replace all of them. However, some individuals specialize in handling heifers and others avoid heifers after weaning.

Consider retaining heifers if:

- Your financial status benefits from deferred income and capital gains.
- Your goals include adapting the herd to your management and environment.
- You have a means of managing them separately from the main cowherd, including custom, cooperative or Extension-sponsored development.
- You have individual records on their dams, birth dates and weaning weights.
- They are from bulls of known genetic background, strong in maternal traits.
- They enhance the genetic uniformity and overall temperament of your herd and have the potential to exceed their dams' productivity.
- They can meet the consumer's demand for consistently palatable beef production.
- You have the labor, facility and management skills to calve heifers.
- You want to specialize in heifer development, sales and service.

Lean more toward buying replacements if

- You don't know enough about the genetic merit of your herd.
- Your tax situation benefits from more depreciation.
- You have a one-bull herd and no options for cooperative heifer development.
- You want to simplify crossbreeding or terminal crossing by stabilizing the female genetics as a 50-50 or "F-1" blend of two maternal breeds.
- You want to deal with only mature cows.

The cows-only option is especially popular with busy operators of diversified businesses and part-time producers. Cows seldom have calving trouble and require no special nutritional management.

Cooperative efforts with like-minded neighbors can be a valuable asset in any scenario for introducing replacements to your herd. A group of producers can often include one who prefers to specialize in heifer development and breeding, charging custom fees to his neighbors. The entire group can have a say in setting up the management, nutrition and breeding program, with expert advice.

An established cooperative group can sell excess heifers and lower-indexing cows at special female auction sales. It can also include a goal of producing uniform 4-year-olds for sale to its members by a heifer-calving specialist within the group.

Similarly, the group can exchange balanced-trait bulls among its members to avoid sire-daughter matings while building overall genetic uniformity in the group's cattle. That opens the door for pooled calf marketing or feeding.

If you cannot get into a cooperative network in the near term, get to know the local heifer producers and custom developers. Find out what resources are available and at what cost, rather than assuming the best cattle or services are too expensive to buy. They can be a much better option in the long run than retaining heifers of non-uniform or

unknown genetic background, or trying to manage such heifers with inadequate resources.

Any cow or heifer will bring a relatively higher price at this point in the cattle cycle. That could present an opportunity for deeper culling in your herd to gain more uniformity and predictability. Be cautious in checking out any “bargain-priced” replacement females, because they may be somebody else’s culls. There is certainly a reason for the lower price, and they may not be a bargain in the long run.

Look for heifers that are 65% of their mature weight at breeding and 80% of that at calving, that will be at least 22 months old at calving, after conceiving in a short and early breeding period. The most productive heifers will rise to the top in the process.

Some producers apply stringent reproductive pressure with 20 to 25% replacement rates, especially in the lower price phase of the cattle cycle. Such generational turnover allows the development of proven cow families within a herd, that can be further refined with the addition of carcass data.

When purchasing, avoid over-fat heifers, or those of unknown health and genetic background and implant status, or discount accordingly for your added risk. Remember, calfhood vaccination for Brucellosis (Bangs) is still recommended, and some states require a negative blood test for outside purchases.

In the next edition of Black Ink, we’ll look at post-weaning management. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

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