



*Boringly predictable?  
The bank won't complain!*

If there's one thing beef production can't be, it's too predictable. We deal with erratic weather and markets, so dependable profit hangs its hat on cow and calf performance that follows a steady and improving trend line.

First, let's qualify those two factors over which we have little control. We can adjust management to fit seasonal weather patterns and other environmental aspects. Markets are constantly changing in their ability to value our calves, but it pays to monitor which trait values are on a long-term upward trend.

That said, it's up to the producer to come up with the calf that is predictably suited to the market. Some producers see a range of niche markets and reason all of their calves will be right for somebody. Maybe so, but the premiums are going to those somebodies who sort the cattle or carcasses accordingly.

Most producers find more reward and security in targeting a specific and long-established market. If an unbiased assessment determines your calves don't have excellent value in any niche, then you need to take quick corrective action.

That could be through female purchases or rapid generation turnover that lets replacement females carry sire excellence into your herd over the next few years. Once you have performance and carcass information that says your calves are a good fit for some market, your task is to produce similar, but slightly better calves every year.

Assuming there is still room for improvement in both uniformity and predictability for your calves, management and health are big factors, but genetics control the limits. What do you know about the bulls you're using? They make up 50% of the calves' genetics, and if you retain heifers the influence increases.

If anything about your herd sire battery is unknown, it hurts predictability of calves. Can you afford to rent or buy cheap, unknown-pedigree bulls of some apparent breed type? Sire selection will have a huge impact, so make sure it is positive for you and the entire consumer-driven beef industry.

There are at least 100,000 different opinions among seedstock cattle producers, and what's true in one region may not be in another, so don't expect to find absolutes. Be wary of strong opinions; check out supporting facts in sire summaries and look for consensus with other advisors.

The best you can do is to find seedstock suppliers you trust who share your perspective, understand your herd, focus on service after the sale and take an interest in helping you achieve premiums for predictably better calves. Ask for cow-calf and feedlot references, and explore opportunities to network with others who produce similar calves.

Study the concept of expected progeny differences (EPDs) and discuss with other producers. Recognize the EPD as a tool for comparing one bull to another or a breed average rather than outright prediction of results in your herd. EPDs are several times more accurate than comparing absolute numbers or contemporary ratios, but there are still surprises.

Remember that predictability may not be the same as popularity. You're looking for better-than-average balance and high-accuracy EPDs across several traits, not just

excellence in some trait you've read about. Also keep in mind that when you are satisfied with cow size in your herd, continued emphasis on growth traits may actually set back herd efficiency.

You can further limit risk by using bulls from more than one bloodline to meet your EPD criteria, and look for ultrasound data to back up carcass EPDs in such areas as ribeye area and marbling.

Seedstock producers may build predictability through "stacked" pedigrees, intensifying the influence of some bull. That can help, if that's the influence you want in your herd. You can build basic herd stability by stacking generations of your own cow families. Keep accurate records and select daughters and granddaughters of cows that demonstrate excellence in everything from disposition and calving interval to consistency and progeny carcass value. Start by culling substandard, inconsistent or problem cows.

Management is more than half of the key to predictable beef, but potential is limited if genetics are unknown or run counter to consistent quality and excellence. The first key to letting predictable genetics realize their potential is the health program, from cowherd to calf vaccinations. After weaning, be sure feedlot management is tailored to make the most of your calves, time after time. If you don't feed on the farm, forge a partnership with a feedlot that specializes in your breed type and target market.

Questions or comments? Call toll-free 877-241-0717. Next time we'll take a closer look at tax strategies.

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