



Use that carcass data

Thousands of producers have carcass data on at least some of their calves. It's supposed to make selection and management decisions easier, but a lot of data sits waiting for analysis and use. It's easy to waste the resource because of information overload.

A glance may show percentage of the more valuable Choice carcasses and less valuable Yield Grade (YG) 4 and 5 cattle. But what does it really say? Take a closer look.

Whether you actually have data or plan to gather it next year, consider the types: basic percentage, group (uncorrelated individual data), tag transfer, and detailed individual data.

If you have only the basic percentages, that quick glance probably yielded all the information. It's better than not knowing if your cattle are likely to grade 83% or 38% Choice, but you can't tell if the overfat YG 4s were Choice or Select, heavy or light. You certainly don't know which cows or bulls to cull.

Group data, like percentage data, is often free but provides the full range of individual carcass weights, grades and values. You can see if the difference from top to bottom is \$250 or \$500, but no cow culling leads. If the data represent one sire, you can compare to previous sire groups, reacting to unfavorable group data by switching bulls.

For as little as \$2/head, and free in some supply chains, you could have individual, tag transfer carcass data. Producers who spend a couple of evenings with

group data often wish they could find the bottom 10% cows. It's possible with all calves individually identified by cow.

The bottom 10% in value probably account for all discounts in a grid-marketed pen. However, one year's data is not enough evidence for culling except extremes, like the cow that produced a light, Standard, YG 4 calf even though it was never sick.

For \$5/head, you can get detailed data, with marbling score, back fat, internal fat and rib eye area. One response to carcass data is deciding to step up to a higher level next time. But remember, the more you invest, the more important it becomes to get a return on your investment.

Carcass data is best analyzed with the aid of computer sorting and correlating product value to pasture and feedlot performance. But you can do it longhand if you start with a value-ranked list. Add columns for weaning weight and feedlot gain.

Most opportunities lie within the top and bottom cattle. A computer spreadsheet can rank by value first, then gain, and then weaning weight. But even on the Big Chief tablet, you can spot the ideal cattle: the ones that weaned, gained and graded above average. You can also see the three-way losers.

The headaches come when your top gainer ranks near the bottom in value because of poor quality grade. What about that Prime YG 2 steer carcass that was 100 lb. lighter than average? Or the top weaning calf that gained poorly in the feedlot but still managed to avoid discounts?

Time will tell, and most cows deserve a second chance. Bad news on any front can be seen as one strike against a cow. They rarely strike out with one inexcusable offspring. More likely, it will take two or three years to gather enough evidence for a strikeout or base hit.

Good news requires the same depth and replications before you see a foundation cow family. On the ranch, cow value begins with ability to rebreed; you gain nothing by producing heifers with a single high-value progeny.

In the feedlot, value comes from feed conversion as seen in average daily gain. On the rail, value comes from uniformity, weight and grade. A tighter calving season and culling outliers will help all the way around.

The grid says perfect cattle are Prime, YG 1, worth \$100 to \$200/head above average. If your cattle are capable of high quality grade, the market will reward genetic and management adjustments there first. If data shows significant YG 4, or too few YG 2 and leaner, you can add value by paying more attention to rib eye—not because the YG premiums are so lucrative, but YG discounts are ruinous. You can maintain pressure on the production traits as well, and detailed data can help find specific sires.

You can use data to adjust short-term sales strategy. Calves that impress at weaning but fall out later can be sold at weaning. Ultimately, you want to adjust production so that such calves are not produced to tarnish your reputation. Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll look at weaning. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

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