



Predictable

By Steve Suther

If the weather report predicts a 90% chance of rain, you might not cut hay today. When the cattle market falls \$10 in a few weeks but a trusted adviser says it is due to bounce back, you may wait a few more weeks to sell.

You like to take action based on a predicted outcome. In a sense, everything you do involves some kind of prediction about how it will shape your future. At least, that's true of any deliberate action.

If you want something that exists only in the future, it's up to you to make it happen. Motives should include profit as a way to finance the vision.

These ideas are pretty much universal, but let's consider your cowherd. Across the country, cattle are getting better based on trends in daily gain, efficiency and quality grades. For decades, the improvements were uneven, giving up beef quality for better performance on the ranch or feedlot.

But buyers don't want the same kind of calves that topped the market in your grandfather's day, because consumer demand has gradually influenced the beef industry.

Cattle are getting better now in a more balanced way because many of them are managed by producers who have a better future in mind. They see a time when cattle make money at every step and produce the beef that consumers want most, stimulating more purchases of high-quality beef.

It took a long time to turn, but the 30-year slide in quality grade began a dramatic rebound late in this decade, thanks largely to genetic advances and strategic applications of technology.

The main reason it took so long is because most producers still undermanage their cattle, or leave them to coast through the annual rituals of calving, breeding and weaning with too little deliberate guidance.

Tools are easily accessible today from cattle publications, ads, computers, public universities, breed websites and seedstock suppliers.

Expected progeny differences (EPDs) still top the list for cattle selection. You can't move your cowherd toward a better future without making genetic decisions, and EPDs provide the structure for accurate predictions.

These expected differences in performance and carcass quality of an animal's sons or daughters are compared to a "zero base" in foundation stock or a standard data year. Inter-breed comparisons can be tricky, but USDA's Meat Animal Research Center publishes annual adjustment tables for some EPDs by breed.

Commercial cows generally do not have known EPDs, but sire selection affects half the genetics of your calves, and you can choose replacement females based partly on their sire EPDs.

Recordkeeping can tell you what is needed to complement the maternal base when you look for bulls to buy or use through artificial insemination. Indeed, records on past progeny performance across all relevant traits are building blocks for effective EPD use.

It's important to look at the accuracy number for each EPD, too. If it is relatively low (<.40), then the value for that trait could change significantly as more data come in. The more predictable sires have EPD accuracies greater than .70.

Blending progeny carcass data with individual ultrasound numbers, combination selection indices and DNA markers are more recent advances in genetic selection tools.

Health and nutrition have made great strides in the last few decades as well, especially the documented studies on the advantages of effective coordination. Beef quality has proven to be a lifetime event for cattle, so a rising plane of nutrition with as little stress as possible helps in planning for a predictable outcome.

Animal identification and recordkeeping allow you to track how well your program succeeds in meeting its objectives, your expectations. Even the most accurate predictions are imperfect, but the process of information feedback helps you increase predictability and profit.

Next time in *Black Ink*[®] Miranda Reiman will look at cutting cost versus adding efficiency. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

END