



Mixed blessings

By Steve Suther

When you count your blessings, remember to include the ones disguised as challenges. Some of them you decided to take on as calculated risks; others intruded on your farm or in your life, but turned out to be “mixed blessings.”

The challenges you have willingly taken on may include another off-farm job, a bank loan, new cattle enterprises, expansion, relocation or going into business with other family members.

Everything that happens could be graded on a scale of desirability. You could even find fault with most blessings, because nothing’s perfect for every situation. Some areas had an abundance of moisture, but too much meant late crop planting, poor-quality hay or flood damage.

Nobody wants a drought, but it can force you to make decisions you resist in better times.

A Texas rancher recently reported, “We culled deeply, and at a loss, just to keep our pastures alive. The silver lining is that we culled so deeply that we got to cull on our wish-list traits, such as disposition, mature size and body conformation, and not just on open and age.

“As a result, we ended up with the cowherd we’ve been breeding for, even if it’s much smaller than we’d planned.”

You have to deal with unpredictable weather and markets each year, looking for ways to hedge risk and play the hand you’re dealt. In the words of one old country song, “We’re all just making the best of a bad situation.”

Every decision weighs risk, the possibility of a negative outcome. How much risk there is depends on how much you know or care about the outcome.

From an economist’s perspective, worrying about risk keeps producers focused on the optimum rather than maximum production, quality or price. Whether it is the free market or government regulation, anything that restricts the ideal or maximum could be a mixed blessing.

Knowledge of risk affects behavior, and ignorance is not always bliss or even partial bliss. Didn’t know the sale-barn bull was sterile? Sometimes those former herd sires are sold by the pound because their breeding career is over.

Bulls in general have been called worse than a mixed blessing, a necessary evil. But that's too harsh. Granted, their management creates special challenges, but those motivate us to construct better facilities.

Not all of those who own cows rely on them for a living, but anyone can adopt a businesslike approach. Cows should pay their way while producing calves that are more blessing than curse. Wild cattle that turn into lingering chronics before they become tough, dry beef have few redeeming qualities.

Over the years, more and more technology has been developed to help produce cattle profitably; some of it even helps in meeting consumer demand for high-quality beef. It can also help you learn what your calves do in the feedlot and packing plant. Bad news from those sectors could be seen as a dark cloud, but the silver lining is the fact that you can use it to improve your herd.

Bulls are necessary of course; the right ones can even turn out to be a blessing if selected carefully and through the use of tools such as expected progeny differences (EPDs) to find a balance from pasture to plate.

They exert long-term influence through their daughters, which may be the ultimate mixed blessing. Replacement heifers require post-weaning management and development; then it could be another year or two before they produce a paycheck. Still, they are often the best way to adapt better beef genetics to fit your resources.

With every decision, there is a risk, a choice of how your future will take shape, and it could involve other people as well. They're called consumers.

Next time in *Black Ink*[®] Miranda Reiman will consider the boundaries of quality beef production. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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