



Keep or cull?

By Steve Suther

You take stock of what you have every day, sometimes in satisfaction and thanksgiving, sometimes in need. The things you own, from ideas to equipment and livestock herds, are parts of a dynamic system, subject to new or better replacing old or outdated.

Ideas range from stray thoughts that nobody bothers to recall to such gems as representative government and rocketry. The media is supposed to report without bias on the most compelling from society's marketplace of ideas. After debate, the best rise to the top and maintain their power until people decide there is a better idea.

You're wondering where this is leading, and that anticipated judgment moves the column along. These are not all of the first words chosen; some have been replaced with words that seemed more likely to make a connection. Others have just been culled.

You make judgments about your truck and trailer, tractor and baler – you only need so much equipment, but it has to work when you need it, pretty much on demand. Otherwise, it doesn't take rocket science to see it's time to trade.

Then there's representative government, a herd of elected officials who produce laws and a regular crop of policies. Voters judge them in the fall, based on how their policies perform.

The ultimate "keep or cull" connection is to your cowherd. A ranch can support only so many cows, but if they are carefully selected, those cows can help support the ranch. You're responsible for their care, but make them work for you, too.

No matter how many or few, each one should be there for a reason. Buyers judge their output each year, voting with their dollars. If you keep records, you can see the wide spread in performance and value. That makes it easy to see the top and bottom performers.

If you calve in the spring, like two-thirds of producers do, fall is a great time for assessment. Calves are weaned and, even if they are not individually weighed, you can see the big ones and the dinks. Records could tell you if there's a pattern.

The pregnancy evaluation or “preg check” is the best way to identify freeloader cows, which often make up 8% of the herd that might as well be liquidated to buy feed for the working girls. Sometimes unexpected bull problems or other challenges can result in more like 20% open, bad enough before you consider compounding the loss by wasting \$200 or more per head on winter feed.

Maybe you have culled the idea of preg checking; most producers apparently have. Across all size operations, only about 20% take this reading. A USDA survey in 2007 that counted both palpation and ultrasound methods said the proportion of herds evaluated by either method ranged from 11% for those with fewer than 50 head to more than 72% for those with more than 200 cows. By region, that was 10% in the east to 42% in the west, across all herd sizes.

Excuses – if that’s not too harsh a word to keep here – included lack of time, labor, facilities and understanding. Preg checking is a doorway to other basic management like deworming, annual shots, ID maintenance, weighing and body condition scoring.

Whether to sell open cows now or later is another debate, but think about the rest of the herd. Ask your vet to guess length of pregnancy. Some admit they often miss by a month, but others nail most due dates, especially if you pull the bulls three or four months ahead. You may be able to group and manage cows by due date, or at least list them in order to help determine which cows to look for any given week in calving season.

Again, records are basic to inform your culling decisions and make sure you have the right cows to match stocking rates next year. One cow may calve relatively late but tops your adjusted weaning weight list. Another only works if she calves very early. Add another layer of complexity with disposition scoring and carcass data.

Longer term records can shed light on sire selection, beyond whether a bull can breed. Too often, the records show most of the problem cows or carcasses go back to a common sire. Bad news, but the only thing worse is not knowing and continuing to subtract value from the herd.

Next time in *Black Ink*[®] Miranda Reiman will help you look at the top line before the bottom one. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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