



The Weakest Link

As the trailer door clangs shut on a disappointment, there's time for a final explanation:

“You are a good-looking cow. Your sire is the most popular, balanced-trait bull we could find. We paid more for your mamma than any other animal on the farm, and you were our son's prize 4-H project. But it's data that counts. With the lowest index in the herd after two calves in three years, you ARE the weakest link. Goodbye.”

Sure, it's harsh from the perspective of a cow that can't justify her keep. But if you're a producer interested in profit, it makes sense. The only question might be whether the culling was overdue.

A few cows lose money for you every year. Records can tell you if they are the same ones, or just random events. Experience, backed by records, often tells us cows don't deserve a second chance—their fault, your fault or nobody's fault—especially when cull prices are high.

Bad luck seems to follow some cows from the start. The heifer with a backwards calf at 3 a.m. decides to calve under a fence as a three-year-old. You find it in time, but the next year it's something else. The open second-calf heifer that charmed her way into a second chance produces the only calf that dies after weaning the next time around. You can supply a hundred more examples.

Animal science is not an exact one, but much of what passes for luck may be better defined one day. In the mean time, consider each hard-luck case a prime candidate for culling.

Without a live calf, you can't pay bills, let alone track postweaning performance and carcass data. This fact is so obvious and important that some producers give it 100% of their attention. That can be a mistake, however. Taking care of job one is not taking care of the whole job, so save a few percentage points of attention.

You may have the maternal side of your herd in such fine tune that it beats every national average for fertility and efficiency. It's like owning a golden link to profit, you might think. But how do your calves perform in the next production-chain link? If you don't know, you must consider another possibility: Your calves could be a weak link in the effort to regain consumer demand.

Without consumer dollars, nobody in the beef industry can pay bills, let alone carve out a bright future and grow the national herd. The industry has always known this, but there were a few weak links in the way we looked at demand signals.

We produced our interpretation of what we thought consumers said they wanted. Unfortunately, too much of the taste fat went out with the waste fat. Consumers didn't know enough meat science to understand that would happen. To them, beef simply missed the target. They moved on while an industry struggled back from the brink.

Experience has shown us that the way to capture more cash from consumers is to produce what we know they want: consistently flavorful, tender, juicy beef.

We know that a calf has to arrive in a feedlot in excellent health with an immune system ready for group living. It has to gain and convert feed to pounds of desirable beef at a rate that is at least average. And it has to hang a carcass on the rail that returns a profit to its owner, processor and future links along the chain to a satisfied consumer.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll look at maturity in finished cattle. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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