



## *The purpose-driven herd*

By Steve Suther

The cows in your herd are there for a reason. For profit's sake, let's hope it's not just because you can't catch them. How did they get on the place, and why do you let them stay?

You should consider those questions for each cow, but start with the big picture. Why do you have cows? That's a deeper question than you can answer in a few seconds.

Many people looking for even deeper answers have purchased Rick Warren's spiritual bestseller, "The Purpose-Driven Life." In the last few years, his concepts have spread to the business world. You can now find articles on "purpose-driven management" in everything from software development to drywall construction and forestry. Why not animal husbandry?

Some have turned their lives around by realizing a higher purpose; so you can turn your herd around by realizing they don't just represent cattle. They represent food for people.

You could start with the same commitment that Warren demands: "In transformational planning, there can be no sacred cows."

If you can't find a reason to have cows, sell them all. But if you think about it enough to realize your mission and goals, just sell the ones that don't fit your reasons. Do the pregnant cows fit your ideal and build a future for your family? Think about it a little more and you can fit your reasons into the consumer-focused—that is to say, purpose-driven—beef industry.

It will require a continuous series of informed choices based on that higher purpose. Confidence in your goal will make decisions easier every day, and especially during drought and market setbacks.

Whether your cows are untagged or wear radio frequency (RFID) tags with a premises number, you need to characterize their genetics.

Are they planned crossbreeds or a vague mix? Are they consistent and uniform while on a genetic path to progress, or bouncing around in well-worn tracks? Does the calf crop vary with last

year's opportunity bulls? Regardless of the current path, you may be able to improve if you understand the purpose and how much focus you can give to herd management.

If you can justify having cows but can't devote much time to manage them, you should probably use bulls of a different, complementary breed and sell calves at weaning. That will net more pounds of commodity calves, if the bulls are better than your cows. Low management is far different than low cost, however, and may result in the highest cost per unit.

If you can manage with some year-to-year focus and records, but not enough to cooperate with the next segment, you can't know or improve postweaning performance. Again, you would probably be ahead to crossbreed and improve the averages.

A purpose-driven herd that fits the greater beef industry requires cooperation and targeted genetic selection. Animal scientists began to study relative economic values of reproductive, growth and carcass traits back in the 1970s. Back then, they said reproduction was five times more important than growth and 10 times more important than carcass traits.

As the industry became more consumer focused, those priorities changed. The last major study, in 1995 by B.E. Melton, said reproduction, growth and carcass traits should have a 2:1:1 focus for those who sold at weaning. However, for those who retained ownership or finished their cattle, carcass traits were already more important than either growth or reproductive traits, at 1:1:1.5.

In the last 11 years, the premiums for hitting specific consumer and branded beef market targets have risen dramatically. But it all starts with the live calf. That's why modern beef production goals must be oriented toward an equal balance among these traits.

Many animal scientists scratch their heads at why so few calves today are the product of planned (purpose-driven) crossbreeding programs. They seem equally puzzled that many of the most respected and profitable ranches in the country today use (purpose-driven) straightbred cattle.

Both of these are equally well-reasoned responses to the market and available resources, including selection tools, as seen by individuals who do not share the same production philosophies. Why don't they all try it the same way? One might as well try to explain differences in politics or religion.

Either way, producers commit to data-driven management and aim for the premium beef-value markets. Quality grade has nearly always led the market as a basis for premiums, but the real prize goes to those who produce more pounds of top quality for less money.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Miranda Reiman will look at maintaining records with or without technology. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail [steve@certifiedangusbeef.com](mailto:steve@certifiedangusbeef.com).

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