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A New Bull Resolution

As we enter another new year, it is the season for resolutions or promises for change in the fresh start of a new year. Another season of hopeful changes is coming soon, one of my favorites - spring bull buying season or arrival of new bull semen supplier catalogs in the mail. I enjoyed reading an article from Dr. Matt Spangler, UNL Professor and Beef Genetics Extension Specialist and have decided to share it today as we begin thinking about herd resolutions.

The question that all potential bull (and semen) buyers need to ask is, "What do I *need*?" The operative word is *need*, not to be confused with *want*. To objectively answer the question, producers need to know how their herd currently performs. This includes but is not limited to current rates of dystocia, pregnancy rates, age distribution of the cow herd, primary reason(s) for cows exiting the herd, weight of calves at the point of sale, post-weaning performance of calves, weight of mature cows and annual (variable) cow costs. Knowing the answers to the questions above helps identify the areas that require the most attention to improving profitability.

After a breeding objective has been formed and the answers to the questions above are in hand, bull selection can begin. The sometimes complex process of selecting bulls can be reduced to a few simple steps.

1. Choose vendors that sell the product you need and that you trust.
2. Choose bulls based on what is "under the hood". In other words, the goal of bull selection is to improve genetics so select bulls based on genetic potential using Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs).
3. Select for more than one trait given more than one trait impacts profitability. Utilize economic selection indexes to do so.
4. Value bulls (or semen) based on the potential to generate a return from the investment. In other words, if the "best" bull sells for more money than he could generate for your enterprise (based on genetic value and number of cows he would be exposed to, and cull value), then pass on him and buy a different bull that does have the potential for a positive return on investment.

Not everyone who raises cattle is profit-motivated, but for those who are, utilizing proven tools such as EPD and economic selection indexes seems logical. With that in mind, here are pitfalls to avoid.

1. Avoid over-emphasizing calving ease (direct). The emphasis on this trait should be in relation to the degree you experience dystocia problems now.
2. If you retain replacement females, keep an eye on mature cow weight EPD if available.
3. If you retain replacement females, do not ignore female fertility. Sustained cow fertility (stayability, functional longevity) EPD represents the ability to remain productive in a herd.
4. If you use economic selection indexes, use the ones that fit your breeding objective. Do not use terminal indexes if you intend to retain replacement females.
5. Know, or ask, what certain EPD/indexes mean and what breed average is. Do not buy a bull assuming he excels for a trait only to later discover that he ranks towards the bottom of the breed.

There are numerous articles on how to interpret and use genetic selection tools. For those wanting to learn more, I'd suggest visiting www.eBEEF.org and looking over the Sire Selection Manual.