News Column
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BULL BUYING

I'm out of the cow business now, but the last two bulls I purchased came from within 20 miles of home. I knew the breeders, knew they were utilizing AI to gain access to top sires, and I knew them to be good, honest people.

And, the price was right.

The first of those two Angus bulls came out of a pen of four. That's all he kept and I had first pick. Deron was busy when I went to look, but he gave me the EPDs, weaning weights, birth weights, and whatever else he had, and let me study them at my leisure.

Knowing that beauty didn't count for much at the sale barn and pounds were what really mattered, I convinced myself to take the bull with the highest weaning and yearling weight EPDs. There wasn't a lot of difference in the numbers, but the price was the same on all the bulls, so I talked myself into buying purely by the numbers.

I stuck with that decision for all of one day. Then I called Deron back and said I wanted the stylish, moderate framed, heavy muscled bull instead. I wish I had a picture. That was one really good Angus bull!

I sat down last week with a local cattleman to discuss EPDs. We talked about what all those numbers mean, how to use EPDs for sire selection, and how to compare bulls of different breeds. In this particular case, the cattleman was converting from a small stocker operation to a cow-calf system. He knew cattle, but hadn't used EPDs much. He had certainly done is research

though, so we weren't starting at ground zero.

In case you haven't spent much time studying EPDs, let's back up and define the term EPD. EPD stands for Expected Progeny Difference. As the name implies, an EPD is the difference that we can expect in a bull's progeny.

So, how do EPDs work? There are EPDs for many traits, including birth weight, calving ease, weaning weight, yearling weight, and more. But, let's look at weaning weight EPDs to understand what the numbers mean.

The EPD for weaning weight is expressed as pounds of calf. The EPD number is useful for comparing one bull of a certain breed to another bull of the same breed. For instance, an Angus bull with a 60 pound weaning weight EPD would be expected to produce calves that are 20 pounds heavier than an Angus bull with a 40 pound weaning weight EPD.

The important point to note in the above example is that the bull with the 60 pound weaning weight EPD won't necessarily produce calves that are 60 pounds heavier than what you have been getting. The number is only useful for comparing to another bull within the breed.

Over time, inflation has affected weaning weights just like it has affected the price of cars, houses, and about everything except grain and computers. Zero may have been the baseline when EPDs first came into being, but zero is not the average anymore. In fact, a quick look at Angus EPDs shows that 48 pounds is the current average weaning weight EPD.

Now, looking at our example, that bull with the 60 pound weaning weight EPD is actually only 12 pounds better than the average of the breed. The other bull, with the 40 pound weaning weight EPD is 8 pounds worse than the average.

But, let's get back to the original conversation with the local producer. After about 30 minutes of kicking around ideas, he pointed out that there is less than 20 pounds difference in the

weaning weight EPD of the average Angus bull and the weaning weight EPD of a bull in the upper 95% of the breed. We did the math and figured the 95 percentile bull might be worth a couple thousand dollars more than the average bull. He is for sure worth more, but the buyer needs to use sound judgement.

So, what did we decide?

We decided that crossbreeding is the fist step. Instead of aiming for a 20 pound increase in weaning weights, we can get 40 to 50 pounds just by using a bull of a different breed. In this case, he has Hereford cows and he'll probably buy an Angus or Simi-Angus bull. It is an easy decision and will be easy money.

The next step is to keep the baldy heifers and, once they are mature and have each had their first calf, breed them to a terminal sire. That next cross will get us another 60 to 70 pounds. With the crossbred cows and a terminal sire we should wean calves that are 100 to 120 pounds heavier than the straight bred calves.

Again, it is an easy decision.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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