

Preparation Keys for Successful Bull Purchases by Commercial Cattlemen

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As the winter and spring bull-buying season approach, seedstock purchasers should do their home work to help ensure the bull(s) they purchase this year meet their needs. Preparedness is the key to making an informed purchase. Before you crack open the sale catalogs of seedstock suppliers, there are few resources and skills you should possess.

First, make sure you understand the use of Expected Progeny Differences (EPD) and selection indexes. While EPDs are not the only selection information you should consider, EPDs are the most effective tools available to describe the genetic differences between animals within and across herds. EPDs are much more effective genetic predictors than actual or adjusted performance records. If an EPD is available for a trait it should be used instead of an animal's own performance record for that trait. The EPD removes age and environmental effects that can bias a decision based on actual or adjusted performance records. Use Calving Ease (CE or CED) EPD, rather than birth weight (BW) EPD, if it's available to select bulls that minimize calving difficulty. CE EPD calculations include BW data and other sources of information that affect dystocia.

Not all EPDs are the same, so make sure you know the appropriate information for the breed of cattle you are purchasing. For a useful reference on EPDs and other genetic topics see the *Beef Sire Selection Manual* (<http://www.nbcec.org/producers/sire.html>) Obtain the breed average EPDs and a percentile rank table available from the most current genetic evaluation for the breed of interest. Percentile rank tables can be found on most breed association websites. These tools will enable you to compare the relative genetic merit of individual animals to other animals in the breed.

Second, make sure you know what traits you would like to improve in your herd? What breed(s) fit in your mating system? If you are using a crossbreeding system make sure the breed you selected fits your objectives. Other factors to consider are: keeping replacement heifers, endpoints for progeny marketing (weaning, back-grounded or in the beef). Assessment of these factors will help point you to the best breed for your needs and the combinations of maternal/growth/carcass traits that best fit your operation and environment. Be sure to apply selection to traits that have direct economic importance in your production system.

Third, set a realistic budget for bull purchases. Like most things in life, price is driven by quality. Evaluation of a seedstock supplier's prior year sale averages will give you an idea of what to expect in terms of purchase costs. That said, prices over the last 12 months indicate that seedstock purchases are substantially more expensive, some as much as \$500 more, than in previous years. The increased bull cost is largely driven by increased development costs incurred by seedstock producers. The added purchase cost makes it even more important to make a well thought out decision.

Fourth, get to know your seedstock supplier and make sure he/she knows you and your operational goals. Seek out recommendations from your supplier well in advance of the sale. Once you receive the sale catalog make a short list of bulls (6-12 head) that fit your specifications. Arrive at the sale site early to inspect the bulls on your short list. Shorten this list of candidates based on conformation and updated data to identify your purchase candidates. Keep the sale order in mind. Stay focused on the bulls you selected earlier. Sticking to your plan will avoid impulse purchases. Remember: Failure to plan is planning to fail. Please contact your extension livestock specialist or me if you need help finding resources to aid in your sire selection activities.