

WHY ALL THE FAT BULLS?

The cost of producing and selling environment.

By Marty Ropp, CEO, Business Development Strategist, Allied Genetic Resources.

When you ask producers, what condition they prefer to buy seedstock cattle in, they regularly reply, "I just don't want to buy over-fat bulls". In fact, for a variety of reasons, seedstock buyers rarely prioritize or purchase "lean" cattle partially because not enough producers offer them for sale in normal body condition. Service-age bulls for purchase with ultrasound measures of .15 to .25 inches of back fat are just not the norm (yearling bulls will generally increase .05 to .1 inches during the 30 days between ultrasound measures and sale). Females less than condition score six or seven too are regularly discriminated against at purchase time despite the production challenges that can come with that extra condition.

So why always the fat ones? I know that generalization isn't fair for everyone that buys and or sells seedstock, but it's often the case. When you consider the cost to everyone involved, all that extra environment creates an unrealistic ideal and is a purely, unnecessary expense to the cattle business.

As an industry, why do we offer overly fat seedstock cattle for sale, and then regularly reward those cattle with premium pricing? There is no doubt that seeing cattle that are in better condition than those we have at home is pleasing. Many of us have had experiences where having the cows a bit thin brought snide comments from neighbors at the coffee shop that sometimes even led to a grumpy family matriarch or patriarch.

Even external influences like buying based on photos or videos, your 4-H judging team coach's influence or watching the judge at Denver, often sends a terrible message to producers about what condition is desirable for cattle in order for them to be evaluated as ideal. It is absolutely part of our upbringing and psyche that we are the caretakers of the cattle. When they are in great condition at home for whatever reason, there is a sense of pride and comfort that goes with it. Unfortunately, when we purchase seedstock using those same criteria for condition and with dreams of pastures full of fat cows regardless of the situation, we are probably not being terribly realistic nor doing ourselves any favors economically.

There is no doubt at times, fat is a very good thing. Finished market cattle with appropriate external fatness (historically .35 to .6 inches of back fat) and highly-marbled, are the gold standard for the majority of the US beef business. Females that hold their condition during production tend to breed and settle better than those whose body is in a substantial energy deficit. Even in those two cases however, once an optimal level of fatness is achieved, the rest is just expensive and actually can be counterproductive both to fertility in females and when Yield Grade deductions and excessive trimming are needed for marketed carcasses. Sure, when all of the animals have been reared in the same environment, it stands to reason those with more condition probably adapted better, but when a group is fed to obesity, does the most obese one really offer any additional value?



Ropp

Biochemically, fat is an energy storage mechanism. This ability to store, then metabolize fat during times of energetic challenge like poor forage seasons or during lactation, is crucial for profitability, as it has always been. Fatty acids are also crucial for many life functions, including reproduction. Cattle performing at a high level with substantial supplemental feed and environment however may or may not prove to be adaptable when run on a budget, which is necessary for profit in the beef industry. For that and other good reasons, over-feeding cattle destined for breeding can have negative consequences, although the practice is traditional. The effects of excess energy intake on young breeding stock is also well documented and yet too often ignored. In a fed cattle situation with animals bound for harvest, keeping the rumen pH low with extra starch and energy can be positive because efficiency of gain can be maximized. For seedstock development however, an acidotic rumen environment is usually a terrible thing. The list of short and long-term problems caused by an acid damaged and extremely permeable rumen membrane is substantial, including feet and joint problems, organ damage and even increased lung pathogen issues. All of these work to shorten the productive lives of bulls and females alike and that absolutely reduces production profits.

In other words, we are the primary problem and usually not the cattle. Even with all the reasons not to promote the overfeeding and over-fattening of breeding cattle, when it comes to sale time, buyers seem to salivate over an offering of smooth fat bulls or females. The lure associated with the distorted depth of side, smoothness and thickness created by over-fatness seems to be overwhelming. Pictures of absurdly over fat cattle grace the pages of nearly every livestock publication and cause folks to stop and admire them even though that individual may present little or no real genetic value and may not even offer the kind of fleshing ability represented in the photo because his or her appearance is often due to extreme feeding. When you consider that we over-feed seedstock largely for marketing purposes then watch at home as all of those dollars disappear with time and production. The extreme expense and futility should be obvious. I would assert that excess nutrition costs for the majority of bulls prepared for sale in the US could top \$50 to \$100 per head (may include creep feeding). That extra feed and expense absolutely does not add and probably reduces lifetime productivity. When you consider we market around 300,000 bulls per year in this nation and millions of females, the price we pay just for our tradition of excessive supplemental feed is astronomical. It is truly an unnecessary cost just to please the eye and potentially fool the shortsighted. Furthermore, this artificial environment often masks genetic and or physical shortcomings that can lead to reduced fertility and are proven to shorten an animal's productive life. Just ask anyone who has tried in vain to freeze semen on an obese yearling bull or breed females who are in the process of losing extra feed-enhanced condition during breeding.

I asked Dr. Dan Larson with Great Plains Consulting to give his views about appropriate bull development. Dr. Larson consults with a large number of seedstock

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producers across the country regarding their development rations and is a tremendous asset to those breeders and ultimately their customers. Dr. Larson writes, ***"The goal of a bull development program is inherently simply: produce a bull that will breed cows for at least 4 years with minimal problems. The route to success is less simple and requires a development program that keeps repeat customers in mind. Not repeat customers due to sale credits from previous years but customers that have had mostly excellent experiences with your bulls. The good news is bull development programs need not be complicated nor include exotic or expensive ingredients."***



Dan M. Larson, PhD.,
Ruminant Nutritionist

While specialty ingredients may contribute a minor benefit, they are not essential and don't add anything a well-formulated ration cannot, except added cost. The most important aspects of formulation are balancing energy, protein and mineral/vitamins with your target gain. Balancing a ration can be inherently simple and that's the problem. The net energy system for balancing rations is archaic, but is the basis of every ration-balancing program. Rather than simply asking someone to balance a ration, talk to a professional who can work with your ON FARM ingredients to design a development PROGRAM to produce those functionally sound bulls."

When designing a program, I typically target 2.75-3.25 pound per day ADG, which will produce a big enough, attractive bull at sale time, without depositing excess fat. These programs certainly vary by operation, but the ration system must contain enough roughage to ensure rumen health and prevent acidosis. Obviously higher performing cattle may exceed this gain and I constantly work with my clientele to adjust the ration program to create the type of bull we want to sell. The key factor in any system is a CONTROLLED provision of concentrate feedstuffs, and roughage if possible. If at all possible, always avoid a self-feeder situation with any replacement calf, be it a bull or heifer. This includes, and is perhaps more important, with self-limited ration systems. It seems that self-limited often equals self-managed, and that is the recipe for disaster. Occasionally, self-feeders are the only option, and in that case, be certain the ration contains adequate digestible fiber to reduce the risk for acidosis. In a controlled system, bunk management is of the utmost importance. Whether feeding a pen of steers or bulls, consistency and accuracy of feeding is the key to rumen health and efficiency. In my experience, acidosis and concurrent over conditioning, are the two biggest factors in customer dissatisfaction with bulls. It is not easy to produce high quality bulls, which is why only a select few do it. However, with an appropriate ration system and development program, you can use the feedstuffs you raise to develop bulls you are proud of in all environments."

The bottom line is many of us are accustomed to buying over fat seedstock. It will probably take time and

faith-in-source to learn to buy animals more practically developed with the buyer's best interest in mind. Some seedstock programs have moved to marketing older bulls to help alleviate buyer concerns with lighter weight yearling individuals and offer a leaner, more service ready product. The truth is, even in a yearling bull program, bulls that weigh 1,100-1,200 pounds and in reasonable flesh are just as capable of mating cows and coming back in satisfactory condition as those weighing 1,400-1,500 pounds. Some research shows these leaner bulls have a significant service capacity and longevity advantage. The difference is, we are well indoctrinated in the art of believing the heavier, faster gaining, fatter bulls are somehow genetically superior because they look more pleasing on sale day, and we even sometimes use this visual evaluation to choose between herds with hugely differing environments."

As an industry and for the sake of our businesses, we need to be better than that. The facts are, when we use third party verified genetic evaluation, EPDs, DNA and other cutting-edge, index tools to sort cattle for real genetic value, we can do a far superior job of sourcing genetics to help ensure our long term success. Actual weights were great back in the 60's, 70's and 80's when weights were all we had. In those days, being awed by 800- or 900-pound actual weaning weights and 1,500 pound yearling weights was understandable. Since then, we have developed evaluation tools that crush the value of those rudimentary, promoted values and allow us to find superior genetics without having to sort through over fed and longevity compromised seedstock.

Don't misunderstand, we still use weights in comparison with other herd mate contemporaries to bolster the value of our genetic evaluation. Comparing one herd's offering to another's based on raw weights and average daily gains is really just comparing the ability of one herd to manage nutrition and environment over another's or maybe just a measure of who has the most feed or the biggest feed truck, given the fact much of the real profit in the beef business is created on the cost reduction side of the equation. Besides, so much of the real profit in the beef business is created on the cost reduction side of the equation that even the philosophy of overfeeding cattle to promote estimated genetic output value and thus enterprise profit has always been somewhat flawed. Obviously, efficient growth performance and weight is an important driver of income and profit for genetics customers up and down the beef chain. ***We just don't have to make cattle obese through the impractical use of huge amounts of supplemental nutrition to find the best ones.*** EPDs compare animals across any environmental circumstance, allowing us to develop seedstock in a way that is good for their longevity and still find the ones that promise greater performance genetics at all levels.

There is a fine line between heavy enough and in good enough condition to market effectively, then breed an optimal number of cows in the first breeding season ***versus the kind of over fat bulls with reduced fertility and a shortened productive life because of fat testicles, ruined feet, joints, rumen and or other organ damage created by nutritional excess during the development process.***