Sound Decisions

The most basic principle producers have to remember about raising, buying and managing bulls is that they have to cover a lot of terrain, a lot of miles and a lot of cows—especially in the West. This makes soundness a No. 1 priority for most ranchers, whether they are commercial operators or seedstock producers, whether they have been in the business for five years or 50. For what good are expected progeny differences (EPDs), birth weights and weaning weights if the bulls can't get to the cows?

BY ANDRA CAMPBELL

One topic upon which commercial cow-calf operators, seedstock producers, university experts and even feedlot operators can agree is that soundness plays an important role in their programs. For many, soundness is an animal's most important trait. The problem is, there is no expected progeny difference (EPD), no quantified way, to measure how sound a bull is.

Sure, some of the bull studs publish progeny evaluations of muscling, capacity, rear leg structure, sheath, etc., to help evaluate sires, but how do you evaluate individual bulls on sale day? How much depends on the environment in which the bulls were raised and not on the genetics? How much of evaluating soundness is purely subjective?

For commercial cow-calf producers Bob Williams and Mitt French, who manage cows on ranches where the elevation ranges from 400 feet (ft.) to 6,300 ft., the terrain changes from sandy to rocky and the climate from hot in the summer to freezing in the winter, it's simple. Bulls have to be sound. It is their No. 1 concern when they purchase bulls.

"The bulls have to get around on our ranch. It is a long ways, sometimes 2 miles, to get to water," says Williams, ranch manager for GI Ranch of Paulina, Ore. "It can be rocky, and it can be hot."

At GI Ranch, 4,200 head of cows are exposed to bulls every year. "All our cows calve in the spring," says Williams, "and we run 20 cows to a bull." They brand their bulls with the year they were born and the year they went into service, planning to keep them for about five years.

"It's hard to keep bulls healthy in our area," he says. "We have problems with foot rot and fighting." By starting out with sound bulls, they have been able to minimize many of these problems.

French, president of Las Aguilas Corp., which owns San Benito Cattle Co. in Hollister, Calif., says 80% of their ranch is in rough country.

"We go from rolling to steep hills, and the bulls have

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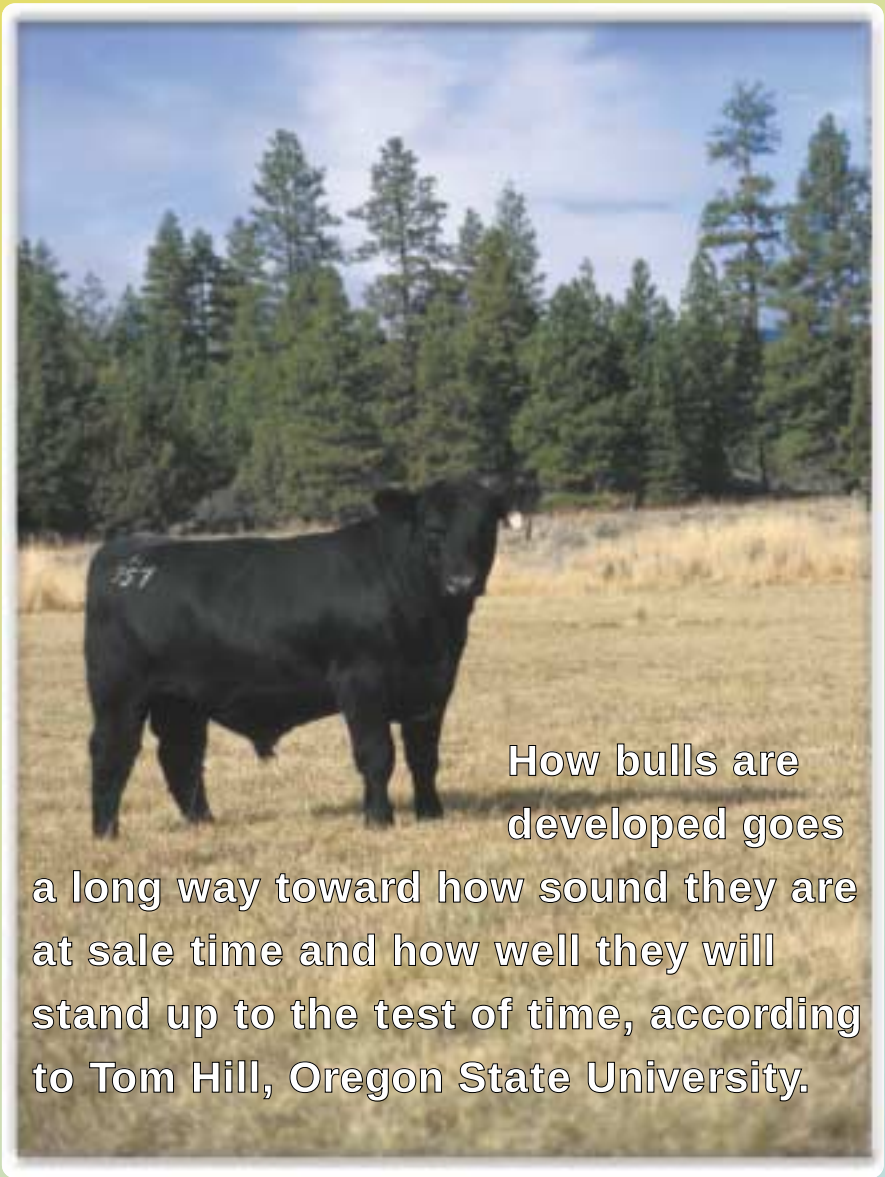
to travel," says French, explaining that they try to give bulls 30 days in the flat area to adjust. "These bulls will run in rough country and in large fields. Sometimes our bull-to-cow ratio gets down to 16-to-1." In places, they can run 25 cows per bull; but for the majority of this vast ranch, it is rough country, and soundness is a primary concern.

"I try to buy most of the bulls myself," says French. "Soundness is a No. 1 priority, but one problem I have is that most bulls are shown in a confined area, with too many bulls per pen. Sometimes it is hard to tell how sound they are."

Ideally, French thinks buyers should see bulls before sale day, but he knows — as in his own case — that it is hard to make the time to do that. "It would be nice if bulls could be in bigger pens, with less bulls per pen, and in pens that have been together for a long period of time."

French says he'd also prefer if bulls were run in more demanding environments prior to being sold. He explains that it is like a young colt raised in the mountains. That colt will be much more likely to survive in the mountains later in life than one that was raised in a more pampered environment.


How bulls are developed goes a long way toward how sound they are at sale time and how well they will stand up to the test of time, according to Tom Hill, Oregon State University.

Genetics or environment?

Is soundness a genetic issue or an environmental issue? According to professional cattle judges Randy Perry, California State University, Fresno (CSUF); Dave Daley, California State University, Chico (CSUC); and Tom Hill, Oregon State University, it begins with good genetics but ends with a solid management program.

"Soundness becomes even more of an issue in the West because we have bigger country, rougher terrain and larger areas," says Perry.

One of the reasons bulls go unsound is because they are too straight or too post-legged, says Perry. "This lends itself to joints' developing fluid and swelling up. There is not enough cushion in the joints."

He believes this problem begins with genetics and that bulls that are developed too quickly, on too hot of feed, will develop more problems. "I don't know of any evidence that says bulls who are developed too quickly will have long-term effects, but they will surely not hold up as well in strenuous breeding situations."

Hill agrees. He says that how bulls are developed goes a long way toward how sound they are at sale time and how well they will stand up to the test of time.

"Genetics are No. 1," says Hill, "but those bulls who are not developed right are more predisposed to having problems on down the line." Hill believes that when you see fat deposition in a bull's brisket area you need to evaluate the bull a little closer — whether you're buying or selling.

"Clearly, a lot of the issues we see are because of how the bulls were developed," says Daley. And it's an issue of what bull buyers demand. "They want heavy weights, and in order to get those weights, bulls are fed hard on soft ground," says Daley. This is going to lend itself not only to leg problems, but foot problems as well.

The size and shape of the foot is another concern for bull soundness. Again, according to these experts, a lot depends on how the bulls are managed. Are their feet trimmed? How soft is the ground on which they have been developed? How hard have they been fed? All of these factors affect foot growth.

Daley says susceptibility to subsequent foot problems is similar to a horse foundering. If bulls are managed in muddy conditions, their feet get soft, and it takes a long time for them to harden.

"It is another genetic component that is influenced by management," he says.

Perry says bulls that have had their feet trimmed are more likely to have problems later. "Someone once said that the best place to trim feet is between the head and neck," he says.

Producers must realize that what looks good in the showring — straight, level top; straight hind leg; straight hip — doesn't necessarily translate to what commercial cow-calf operators want travelling their terrains.

"The old-timer wanted a bull who was droopy-rumped and had some set in his legs," says Perry. "There is nothing wrong with this type of bull." In fact, these experts agree, if they had to choose between the straight, level type and the old-timer's choice, they would go with the not-so-pretty, more-functional bull.

If those of you who show cattle have your feathers rumpled, here's something that will make you feel better. The experts all agree that the showring has never been closer to the commercial industry than it is today.

"Bulls have to be correct," says Perry. "They have to have an adequate amount of flex in their joints and be big-footed. Bulls also need a tight, neat sheath and show an adequate amount of depth and spring of rib to be sound," says Perry, "and it doesn't matter if it's in the showring or in range conditions."

"For me," says Hill, "the biggest sign is if the bull can cover his front track with his rear foot." This is a pretty simple and easy way to tell if a bull is sound. "A question you can ask yourself is, does the bull maintain integrity of dew claw when he moves off his hind leg, and does he have extra set to his pastern? A mistake many people make is being too critical of a bull that has more set in his hind leg. This is less detrimental than a bull that is too straight."

Hill asks himself this same question whether he is evaluating a pen of range bulls for his judging team or whether he is the official judge at a show.

Daley agrees and says too much set is not a significant problem under range conditions. "I am not fond of looking at bulls who have too much set, but there is no data to show that these bulls are not sound."

Mobility in the front shoulder is also important when bulls are evaluated for soundness, says Daley. A short-strided bull will be less likely to survive in the commercial world.

Since there's not an EPD and there's usually not any data given as to how sound the bull is, what exactly do you do?

According to Daley, who says he is not a risk-taker, if you are a seedstock producer, look for bulls with high accuracies and seek the oldest daughters of the bulls you can find before using them. You will find out many more factors than just how sound they are. More than likely, the bull progeny of these cows, if they are managed right, will be sound, functional bulls that will keep your customers coming back.

Buy your seedstock from registered breeders who have good reputations and who perhaps develop their bulls in country similar to your herd's. Most importantly, customer and seedstock source have to communicate with each other.

Following are three seedstock producers who have made it their business to discover their customers' needs.

Rogue River Ranch

Located in Central Point, Ore., Rogue River Ranch encompasses three separate ranches in two states and owns four breeds of cattle — Angus, Red Angus, Polled Hereford and Gelbvieh. With close to 1,500 head, Rogue River Ranch and Dick Hubman, the man behind their success, sell quite a few bulls each year.

Though their cows are the driving force behind Rogue River's success in the registered industry, commercial industry and showring, their bulls are the focus of the entire operation. "Selling range bulls is the most important part of our program," says Hubman.

The bulls are fed a high-roughage ration that consists of ranch-raised corn silage mixed with alfalfa hay. The bulls are developed on 6 pounds (lb.) of grain per day to gain a targeted 3 lb./day, explains Hubman. The ration is adjudsted depending on gains and weather.

The bulls spend 100 days on feed and are in shape to turn out the day after they are sold. "The bulls are fed this high-roughage ration so they are able to realize their potential rate of gain," says Hubman. "Our bulls show 80% of their genetic potential with this type of feeding situation."

The bulls are weighed every 30 days, and all necessary data is complete by sale day. Bulls are also ultrasounded, semen-tested, vaccinated and tested for trichomoniasis (a venereal disease).

"We don't sell every bull at our sale," says Hubman. "I go through all the bulls, and the first thing I look at is structure. If the bulls do not have sound feet and legs, they simply won't work for our buyers."

Hubman says he'll see more front-end problems, explaining that rear-leg structure rarely presents a problem in their bulls. "These bulls [those weak in the front end] aren't able to handle the extra weight and don't make the cut for the sale."

If Hubman finds any corns, the bull is cut from the sale. If he sees a foot that has grown unevenly, the bull is cut.

"We start with 235 bulls on test and eliminate down to around 200," says Hubman, adding that bulls are cut for more reasons than structural problems. Reproductive evaluations, scrotal measurements, semen tests, weights and injuries also play a role in determining which bulls make the sale and which do not.

"We have never replaced a bull for structure," says Hubman, explaining he would be happy to do so if the occasion ever arose. He hopes, however, to find those problems before they become a problem for someone else.

"Our bulls are not overconditioned; they don't get their feet trimmed; and they are guaranteed to be sound breeders," says Hubman, who agrees with the experts that bull development can be detrimental to soundness. "Ideally I would like to be able to feed our bulls in bigger lots with less mud, but we don't have that luxury here. Some of our bulls don't make the sale for that reason."

What does Hubman look for when he walks through his pens?

"I look for bulls with a big foot, deep heel and the correct angle in pasterns. I like to see a 45-degree angle to the shoulder; if they are too straight, they knuckle over in their knees," he says. "The bulls should have a nice, natural set to their hock. I like to see a little flex and for the bulls to take a nice, long stride. You need to look for swelling in their joints and for the correct angle from their shoulder down to their knee and finally to their front foot."

Tehama Angus Ranch

The Borror family of Tehama Angus Ranch are true pioneers of the Angus breed. Located in Gerber, Calif., the ranch is

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owned and operated by Bill Borror and his son and daughter-in-law Aaron and Rebecca Borror. Another two of Bill's sons, Eric and Kevin, farm the land that is connected to the cattle operation.

The Borror family has been performance-testing cattle for 85 years. Starting with Jerseys, then moving to Holsteins and finally to Angus, they had their own performance program long before others had thought about it.

They run 370 head of mother cows and expect bull progeny to work in range conditions.

"We expect our bulls to go out and breed cows and come back in decent shape," says Aaron Borror. "We guarantee our bulls to breed cows and cover some accidental problems, like broken penises, for the first breeding season."

"We sell yearlings and 18-month-old bulls in our sale," says Borror. "We don't trim any feet, and [we] eliminate bulls from the sale we feel are not structurally correct." Last year, Borror says, they didn't sell two good bulls because they were wearing their hooves unevenly. "This may present problems down the road," he says, explaining that it's easier to eliminate the problem than deal with the consequences.

Bull development is important for Tehama Angus Ranch. They develop their bulls in 8- to 15-acre pens. The bulls have to travel to get to water, feed and shade.

"The bulls get quite a bit of exercise," says Borror, who feels this is important to the proper development of their bulls. "I wouldn't want to feed our bulls any harder than we do," he adds, explaining that more fat in the scrotum reduces the cooling ability of the testicles.

A few years ago they noticed that calves by a particular bull had more fluid in their joints. "These bulls tended to be fatter," says Borror. They stopped using this bull because they felt his calves were not sound enough to sell. "If the bulls don't go out and add value to the commercial herd, then they have no business being in our herd."

Another concept Borror learned a few years back was to deliver his own bulls. "I need to be certain that the bulls are 100% when I deliver them," says Borror. "When somebody else hauls them, I can't be certain they didn't get hurt in the trailer."

Borror feels like his customers deserve a sound bull and will do whatever it takes to get them one.

Lark Angus Ranch

Dave Peterson, manager of Lark Angus Ranch in Powell Butte, Ore., says that they provide a 100% guarantee for one year on the bulls they sell — no matter what happens. This 500-head operation markets their bulls to northern California, Oregon and Idaho.

"We develop our bulls in large traps with lots of rocks and trees," says Peterson.

The ranch, owned by Ray and Lita Kilpatrick, is located 5 miles north of Powell Butte. "We sell a lot of our bulls to operations that run their cattle on government ground," says Peterson. "This means they have to cover a lot of ground, and in our program it's more type than EPDs or anything else."

Peterson wants to raise bulls that are the right type. "It's not a question of how big they are or if they had 80 pounds of yearling growth," he says. Buyers look at structure closely; there are some things people will accept and some things they won't. "An example is bulls that are too straight-legged or have too much set. For one rancher it's OK; for another it's not."

Peterson knows one thing, though. He wants his bull customers to return and will do whatever it takes to make them happy.

"A few years ago I fed a concentrated ration that got the bulls too fat," says Peterson, explaining he was trying to get the heavy weights. "I learned my lesson and have gone back to a high-roughage ration with a limited amount of grain. We start slowly with chopped hay. At 11 months of age, we increase the grain to 10 to 12 pounds and still develop bulls who will weigh 1,150 pounds at yearling time."

"You have to preach what you believe in," says Peterson. "Plus, you have to be in contact with your customers so you know what they need. This is why I know what our customers like; I talk to them. They tell me they like the bulls this way." AJ

Agri Beef

Agri Beef, founded in the late 1960s, has six feedlots in the United States and feeds more than 400,000 head of cattle each year. Their Moses Lake operation, which includes three feedlots in Washington state, feeds close to 60,000 head of cattle.

Currently, 65% of the cattle found in Agri Beef's feedlots are custom-fed cattle with the remaining being Agri Beef's own cattle. Jim Sauter, general manager of the Moses Lake operation, says they offer a variety of marketing options and were recently licensed as a Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program Partner Feedlot.

Sauter says there are outliers in the feedlot industry.

"Outliers are cattle who tend to be poor performers. Part of this relates back to their structure," he says. "This time of the year, there is 2 inches of snow on the ground in the feedlot. This makes for tough conditions with the cattle."

The poorer performers may not finish with their pen at 1,250 pounds (lb.), says Sauter. "They could weigh 100 pounds or less than their penmates." He says that cattle on feed need to have strong leg structure, especially during the winter. Sure, they will be harvested with the rest of the group, but at what kind of a loss?

"Most feedlots today utilize slick-bunk management, where all you find at the end of a feeding is crumbs," says Sauter. The slower, weaker calves are the last ones to the bunk and don't get as much feed. "We want to manage the whole pen," says Sauter, "not the 98 or 99 who can make it to the bunk."

These cattle weren't light when they arrived; they were comparable to the rest of their penmates. But they weren't able to perform as well. They were the last ones to the bunk; they were the ones with a hurt shoulder or stifle. When the pecking order was established, they were the last in line.

"When the outlier becomes a realizer is when you see the most loss," says Sauter, explaining that realizers are the calves that have fallen so far behind they have to be harvested before the rest of the pen. "Substantial discounts are taken when an outlier becomes a realizer," says Sauter. "We have realized our losses and know that those calves have gotten far enough behind that they are not coming back."