The Messages, In Short

BIF's annual convention was held May 1-3 in Madison, Wis. The theme was "Breeding Management for Maximum Profit," and "systems approach" seemed to be the buzzword. The following quotes highlight the messages of featured speakers. Further details about the meeting and awards are included in BIF Update.

THE BEEF COW —WHAT PURPOSE?

Dr. P.D. and Connie Hatfield
Hatfield's High Desert Ranch
Burns, Ore.

- It's not the ranch's job to provide what the cow needs to perform, it's the cow's job to perform on what the ranch can economically produce.
- I am opposed to treating anything. Anytime we have to treat an animal on our ranch, it is a sign of poor genetics or poor management.
- We set some goals to produce fault-free cattle that could efficiently harvest the feed our ranch economically produced. That is different from manufacturing feed to fit the needs of the type cattle popular at the moment.
- The steers we produce must be acceptable for the feedlot, but to expect any economic improvement at the cow-calf level by producing bigger, faster gaining steers is wishful thinking. And the reason is because the cow-calf industry is a by-product business.
- Beef cows exist to convert forage into food. What can be done in a hot house situation where everything a cow needs is served up with a pitchfork and a bucket may have little bearing on profit in the real world.
- High milk production and top growth rates are of value to cow-calf producers only if an inexpensive feed source is readily available to support that performance.
- It's hard to find anybody that has any information except birth weight, weaning weight and yearling weight. And those don't do much for telling the story on profit.
- The main place we make our profit is in changing our grass curve to where we have forage year-round without spending money.
- Our number one goal is fertility, our number two goal is fertility, our number three goal is fertility, and there aren't hardly any other goals as far as our operation is concerned.

GENETIC IMPROVEMENT, NEW ZEALAND STYLE

James Innes
New Zealand

- It's a completely different industry than yours here. It's a very, very low input industry in New Zealand. The day we have to supplementary feed cattle, we've got too many.
- We don't calve our females until they are 3-year-olds because we don't believe even in feeding our heifer calves. Our yearling heifers weigh the same as yearlings as they do at weaning time—this is the level of inputs that we put into them.
- We are so concerned about bull fertility that we expose all these young bulls to 80 cows for a 42-day breeding season. We want to find out what the conception rates are like from those young bulls, and that can't be done through artificial breeding.
- Progeny testing takes up about 80 percent of all our time and resources involved in the Genepool program.
- All male progeny are taken through 15 months of age. Female progeny are all taken through to have their first calf, whether it's as a 2-year-old or 3-year-old. At that stage, we are then able to score the udders, eye pigmentation and feet on all the heifers . . . That is all part of the progeny test we run on our bulls—it is very, very hard to get a bull that comes out the other end that we are happy with.
- Those top progeny-tested bulls are used by artificial breeding back over the nucleus herd every year, and they are used extensively in the elite herds of contributing breeders. We also sell semen.
- We have a large number of herds (Genepool cooperator herds) that initially were hopeless and couldn't perform, but by buying back these progeny-tested bulls and using that semen, they are now making big contributions to the nucleus herd.

MERCHANDISING BEEF IMPROVEMENT

Jim Leachman
Leachman Cattle Co.
Billings, Mont.

- Those people that succeed in the long run have a balance of three things: management, genetics and marketing.
- Marketing is simply identifying and producing to satisfy a need.
- The question I raise, in agriculture especially, is: "Do we market what we produce, or do we produce what we can market?" There's a distinct difference . . . I think we need to produce for a market. We need to produce to satisfy needs.
- Many times I have people ask me what is the great-grandam of that bull . . . and I have to say to them, "Do you know who your great grandmother was?"
- The performance data and programs developed have allowed us to describe our cattle accurately and to supply them to people for specific needs—to supply cattle by specifications. Many of our most satisfied customers are, in fact, sight-unseen customers.

- We have developed a philosophy that we want to produce more bulls, better bulls for less . . . we want to be the Henry Ford of the cattle industry.
- The best bull is a sold bull.
- Basically, every hour of my life is spent merchandising. I don't care if I'm on a plane with a businessman, or downtown Billings talking to bankers or lawyers. I think all of us, wherever we are, should be communicating and merchandising beef improvement.
- I think that we not only have to be concerned about breed improvement, but we need to be concerned about breeder improvement. . . . There has to be not only breed improvement, but economic improvement.

CRITICAL POINTS IN USING CROSSBREEDING TO INCREASE PROFIT

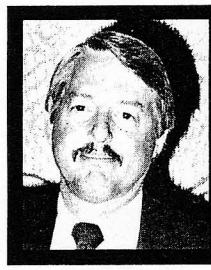
David Notter
Animal Scientist
VPI & SU

- The advantage of the crossbred cow is about double that of the crossbred calf . . . that is to say that two-thirds of the advantage in crossbreeding is in the cow.
- A moderate-sized, productive cow herd gives flexibility for anything needed . . . it can be used for replacement heifer production or with terminal sires . . . when you get outside of this you simply take on more risk.
- The purpose of crossbreeding must be to develop an efficient, adaptive, stable cow herd because that's what's going to make the weaning calf produce the money.
- The purpose of crossbreeding is the development of a stable, productive, adaptable cow herd, but emphasis has historically been on the calf performance.
- An adaptable cow herd and increased milk production will yield greater calf weights with less extra cost.
- If your calves are fat because your cows are giving plenty of milk, then ask them to do more . . . but design that system to fit a market, and to never lose that adaptation and performance within the cow herd.

MAXIMUM, MINIMUM AND OPTIMUM FOR THE SEED STOCK INDUSTRY

H.H. Dickenson
Executive Vice President
American Hereford Assn.

- Producers that practiced "optimum production" years ago were considered non-progressive then . . . now they are considered survivors.
- The business of controlling cost has become the number one priority of grain and livestock production.
- The idea of matching cattle to available resources in order to cut costs is readily acceptable to commercial cattlemen . . . it's practical and makes common sense.
- Seed stock breeds have to be different to accommodate the commercial man looking for optimum production. Seed stock producers must specify what a breed has to offer and where it fits in the production scheme.
- We can't sell optimum if we can't define optimum.
- The seed stock industry should concern itself with the system of product specification. We must do a better job of producing specifications for breeds and individuals.
- If properly used by the commercial industry, the concept of optimums and systems could enhance the seed stock image.
- We need to concentrate on selling the optimum concept and developing product specifications.
- The topic of optimum production or "systems" is on a roll, but perhaps we're making it too complex and difficult. The concept is relatively straightforward and readily acceptable, but difficult to discuss in specifics.



WHAT I HEARD ON MY TRIP TO THE TOWER OF BABEL

Hank Fitzhugh
Winrock International
Morrilton, Ark.

- Successful cattlemen do follow the systems approach. They have built their programs on matching genetics to the environment. They emphasize both fitness and performance traits. They optimize, not maximize. And they give first priority to herd efficiency.
- The systems approach is a strategy. A strategy that producers—seed stock or commercial cattlemen—can use to determine the resource base that characterizes their production system; to identify the key constraints to the resources they have to work with; and to put all of this together to be sure they have a package that will improve the productivity and efficiency of their system.
- The real challenge is to match your genetic resources to your production / market environment.
- The seed stock producer who doesn't use the systems approach to identify the needs of his customers and anticipate what those customers will need, can't be ready to provide customers with what they'll need in the future.
- There's one primary goal of beef improvement—regardless of your production phase—and that should be increased profitability.
- Quite often, intermediate values of performance traits will be optimum, not the extremes. The levels of these intermediate values are different for different production / market conditions. There is not a single optimum for all conditions.
- The optimal levels tend to be higher for better production environments.
- Production efficiency is a characteristic of the herd, not the individual. You can increase herd output and / or decrease herd input.
- In general, the optimal levels for the performance traits (size, maturing rate, milk production, etc.) are those which increase herd output. Optimal levels for the fitness traits tend to decrease herd input. AJ