

Leveraging EPDs for Competitive Advantage

Genetic tools help with marketing, creating cattle that serve customers.

by Elizabeth Rosson, editorial intern

In cattle production, informed decision-making is a cornerstone of success.

Expected progeny differences (EPDs) are nothing new to the industry, but it's how producers use them that makes all the difference, says Paul Bennett, Knoll Crest Farm, Va. Bennett spoke on the "A Business Case for Using EPDs" panel, part of the 2023 Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) conference in Calgary, Canada, in July.

Donnell Brown, RA Brown Ranch, and Sean McGrath, Round Rock Ranch, also offered their perspectives.

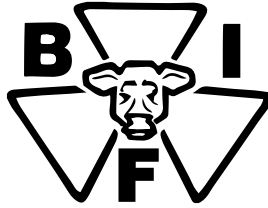
The profitability of cattlemen hinges on the marketing potential and genetic improvement EPDs bring to the table, allowing producers to thrive in their unique environments and meet diverse customer needs.

"As I think about a business case for EPDs, really the first thing that comes to mind is customer service," Bennett explains. "A big part of customer service is our need to accurately quantify the product that we're selling. We've got to get it right."

He says investing the time and effort into the records it takes to inform EPDs helps the breed attract a wide customer base and reinforces decision-making capabilities.

"We have high expectations of the breed associations that we submit

data to, but we also must recognize and understand that the buck stops with us," Bennett explains. "Our EPDs in actuality are no better than the ingredients that are used to create those EPDs, and as a seedstock producer, I am largely responsible for submitting those ingredients to the breed associations."



He likens genomic testing to the process of collecting birth weights, weaning weights or yearling weights. The up-front investment results in more information at weaning time, allowing for better decision-making that outweighs the initial cost.

"We have worked to optimize the amount of data we present to our customers," Bennett says. "I think a lot of times we can put our customers in information overload at times, which creates frustration on their part."

Brown says it's a seedstock producer's job to communicate the role of EPDs to their customers.

"When I select a bull, that bull is going to produce a lot of offspring and have a major impact on my program," he says. "EPDs, to me, are a part of our toolbox along with visual appraisal."

He often simplifies sire selection for his customers by color-coding EPDs in a red-yellow-green system based on their environment, goals and limitation.

"EPDs don't mean we're going to

make the best decisions. It doesn't mean we're going to make the right decisions every time," Brown explains. "It means we'll make more right ones than we do wrong ones."

McGrath knows not all producers have the same environment or budget. He ranches on native range in Canada, where only 70% of his fenceline can be checked by side-by-side or truck and another 15- 20% on horseback. The rest is rugged enough he can only reach it by foot — if possible.

He used that truth to illustrate why his genetic selection must cut labor requirements as much as possible.

"Your context impacts your selection decisions," he adds.

Using EPDs based on available resources can allow cattle to thrive in a specific environment and make it possible to provide numbers that fit your buyers' needs — putting more money in cattle producers' pockets, McGrath says.

Brown says the usefulness of EPDs is really up to the breeders.

"Are we just going to look at the bells and whistles and what the sales guy tells us? Are we going to look at the window sticker that tells us what's inside the cab? What's under the hood that's going help us with that animal as we move forward?" Brown asked.

Informed decision-making requires action, he noted. **AJ**