

**W**hile many Angus bulls are born each year, not every one of them is qualified to seek employment as a herd sire.

Culling bulls maintains quality in a seedstock supplier's offering, says Tom Field, beef cattle researcher at Colorado State University (CSU). "It is the most important step for seedstock producers to take to protect their reputations. Never sell anything that isn't going to work for a customer."

To determine where that cutoff is, he continues, you have to understand what your customers need.

"Getting somebody to buy a bull from you for the first time is not nearly as much work as keeping them coming back," Field says. "When you sell somebody something, it had better be right, or you'd better be prepared to make it right if something does go wrong."

A focus on the quantity of what's being produced without a very clear focus on its quality is detrimental to the longevity of a program, Field points out. "I think that probably explains why . . . the average seedstock producer lasts five to seven years."

To build a program, it's important to know market saturation, or how many bulls your market area will absorb. The beef cattle management team has researched the market area for the CSU herd.

"Most of our customers are within an 80-mile radius of campus. For the most part, they are looking for bulls that make no mistakes," he says. "We don't have to have the biggest bull. We don't have to have the bull with the highest milk EPD (expected progeny difference), or the most growth, or the most of any one thing. We do have to produce bulls that don't make mistakes."

No mistakes means their offspring should be born easily, have high survival rates and good dispositions, grow adequately, and be profitable while absorbing a minimum of discounts if they are sold on the rail, Field says. "If we can do that, we can keep most of our customers pretty happy."

### Culling in action

To offer customers his best herd sire prospects, Chuck Tastad, owner of McCumber Angus Ranch, culls the bottom 20%-25% of his bull calf crop each year.

# Wanted: One Good Bull

Only bulls with exceptional EPDs backed by outstanding pedigrees and acceptable phenotypes need apply.

Story & photos by *Corinne Patterson*



► Chuck Tastad, owner of McCumber Angus Ranch, Rolette, N.D., says culling the bottom 20%-25% of his bull calves maintains quality and consistency in his offering. McCumber Angus is a family operation. Tastad is pictured with his granddaughter, Sydney.



► The only way to stay in business is to have a product that people actually want, says Tom Field, CSU beef specialist. Many seedstock suppliers who have been in the business for several generations have done so by providing high-quality breeding animals and culling those that are inferior.

"I think it's very important to cull because it gives us a lot more uniformity in the bulls that we do sell to our customers," says the Rolette, N.D., producer. "We are getting rid of the ones that haven't performed as well and genetically aren't as good as the rest."

Tastad's management practice of culling bulls has proven to be successful. His family operation has been serving commercial and seedstock cattlemen for almost 40 years.

Tastad weighs heavily on structure and performance traits when culling. He says many of the culls would ratio below 95 compared to their contemporaries.

"Bulls are culled once at weaning and then again after they've been on test and yearling weights have been taken," he says.

He'll cull others if structure problems show up or if performance drops off, but by this time, he says, culls have pretty much been weeded out.

The bulls are gain-tested on the ranch, with weights taken every 30-40 days. There are many advantages to having the bulls on the place, including monitoring for culling purposes. But once the bulls go on test, Tastad waits until after the test to do additional culling.

"A lot of our customers are close. They can come by, and we can go through the bulls with them," Tastad says. "The bulls are right here, and their mothers are right here. They can see the whole program just from one stop."

Will Fritel, a Rolette, N.D., commercial producer, has been buying Angus bulls from McCumber Angus since 1975. He says knowing that the Tastads cull a quarter to one-third of the bull crop is very important in his decision to purchase his sire genetics from the ranch.

"His bulls have to meet certain standards or they are not sold," Fritel says. "That's very important. When I go there to buy a bull, I know it is going to be a good one because of his past reputation and his culling process."

Fritel adds, "He has established his reputation because of the heavy culling he does."

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### Future careers

Since a career as a herd sire isn't in every bull calf's future, some must find employment by entering the food supply.

In the past, many of the culls from the McCumber bull battery have been finished as steers to get carcass data, Tastad says. However, the last couple of years he has sold the culls at weaning. "We think we are probably getting more data, and maybe more accurate data, from ultrasounding our bulls and heifers rather than getting the carcass data back on the bottom 20%."

Known Angus genetics are in high demand, allowing a healthy marketing option for steers. And knowing more about the potential of those calves opens the door even further.

"When we talk to our customers each year, we can say, 'Here's the progress that we've made in realizable terms in feedlot performance. Here's how our cattle perform in terms of health. Here's how our cattle have performed on the rail,'" Field states. "And now we've added a little value to the bulls because we have taken their cull mates and answered some questions with them about our cattle's performance beyond the farm gate.

"The key is to recognize problem cattle that, for whatever reason (chronic health problems, etc.), are just not going to work," Field says. "Get them sorted out, straighten them up as much as you can, and then get them sold as commercial cattle."

### It's about quality

Many of the European breeds that were brought into the United States in the 1970s and 1980s experienced rapid growth in numbers, Field points out. There was greater demand for these cattle than there was supply. In many cases, if it was a bull, it got sold as a breeding animal. But if you look at those breeds today, he says, they are not necessarily experiencing the same growth that characterized their early history.

"Some breeders did not pay attention to the quality of their product," he says. "We can see examples of that in all kinds of different areas of the economy. If you don't produce something that people can trust and can count on, sooner or later, it will catch up with you. The same risk is inherent



► Performance tests across the nation are the proving grounds for many bulls that become herd sires. Whether bulls are tested at a home operation or sent to a central testing station, many times only the top individuals make the sale.

in the Angus business. Product sales will always suffer if we sacrifice quality for quantity."

Seedstock producers should evaluate where they want to be in the long run, Field

adds. "It is always critical to keep asking the question, 'Will this bull make the quality of life for my customer and his or her family better?' And if the answer is yes, sell him as a bull. If the answer is no, castrate him and capture his value as a feeder calf or a fed steer."

While purebred Angus breeders are primarily in the beef industry to sell seedstock, not every bull calf is going to make a great herd sire.

"I do think it is important that we take out that bottom 20% and just offer the top end to our customers. I think they appreciate that, too," Tastad says. "And they really feel that we're trying to help them and not just take advantage of their bull-buying dollar."

Field adds, "One thing about bull customers, they vote with their dollars, and they are not afraid to change suppliers."



### Evaluate market signals

No matter what business you are in, Tom Field, beef cattle researcher at Colorado State University (CSU), says it is important to have a business model with a true focus on where you want to be in the next five, 10 or 15 years.

When stepping into the seedstock business to market bulls, there are a couple of important questions producers should answer before they even purchase their first animals, Field says.

#### (1) How many bulls will the market absorb in the geographical radius in which you want to sell your cattle?

"If you are in an area where there are five other seedstock producers selling 700 bulls, and there is room to sell another 30 bulls, you'd better not try to sell more than that 30 unless you are convinced you can take market share away from those existing producers," he says.

The only way to do that is to have a better product, better services or a better value. "Remember that value is more than having a cheaper product; your cattle need to return recognizable benefits to customers. Adding value will allow you to sell bulls for a fair return on your investment," Field adds.

#### (2) Are your cattle good enough to take away existing market share from someone else?

You have to look at your own operation with a critical eye, Field says. The decision you have to make is how to market cattle to earn the highest return.

"As a seedstock producer, in many ways, we need to think like a commercial producer. It's one thing to say we are going to sell 200 bulls or 100 bulls at a sale. That's fine. But what are you going to do with the 50, 60, 100 or even 150 mates to those bulls that weren't good enough to make the sale?"

"A person has really got to give some thought to, not only their marketing strategy, but also their cash flow before they go racing off to try to build a program," Field adds.