



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

Potential is a heavy burden

Perhaps it is hopefulness and optimism that make cattle breeding such an amazing vocation. Every selection decision we make has consequences and once initiated cannot be undone. Thus we eagerly anticipate each successive calving season knowing full well that the outcome of each mating, both good and bad, will be revealed in the form of a new life. I suspect that very sense of hope and anticipation has motivated cattle breeders throughout the ages. Surely Robert Bakewell, George Grant and nearly every cattle producer since has experienced the unique sense of wonder that accompanies each new calving season.

Management matters

The value of a calf evolves as the production cycle transitions from birth to weaning and on to finishing or breeding. Certainly, genetics will play a significant role in determining the final value, but genetic potential is only part of the equation — the cumulative effect of management decisions made during the calf's life will significantly affect net merit.

Assuring a calf's opportunity to realize its potential involves a commitment of managers to the following protocols and decisions:

- Keep 'em healthy.
- Maintain source and age verification.
- Manage with Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) and humane handling.
- Focus on stress minimization during weaning, processing and transport.
- Target management to a specific market or breeding outcome.
- Collect and report data.
- Hold 'em accountable.

Keep 'em healthy. Assure each newborn receives adequate, high-quality colostrum and is managed under a disciplined preventative health program throughout the duration of its life. Poor health negatively affects growth, longevity, carcass performance and profitability. Great genetic potential will be suppressed by poor health management.

Maintain source and age verification. Emerging international and market signals suggest that premiums are associated with establishing a verifiable source and age protocol such as AngusSource®. Participation allows the opportunity to capture price premiums particularly on those calves that are not selected for the breeding herd.

Manage with BQA and humane handling. Quality assurance guidelines have been established in the industry to eliminate injection-site blemishes, assure product

wholesomeness, and train people in appropriate use of animal health care products and practices. The importance of humane handling cannot be understated.

Appropriate animal husbandry practices coupled with adherence to BQA standards underpin nutritional and health management and, ultimately, performance and end product value. For the breeding herd, correct animal handling is key to minimizing facility repair costs as well as injuries to both cattle and people.

Focus on stress minimization during weaning, processing and transport. Low-stress weaning techniques are critical to assisting calves in successfully making the weaning transition, regardless of whether they are being targeted as breeders or as feeders.

Minimizing stress during processing by avoiding extremes in temperature, maintaining well-designed and functional facilities, and implementing effective personnel training and monitoring systems supports cattle health and performance.

All of the hard work done at the ranch can be undone by poor handling during transport, so working with reputable trucking companies and communicating effectively with truck drivers is another route to adding value to cattle.

Target management to a specific market or breeding outcome. Author Stephen Covey advocates that good management is predicated on the concept of "starting with the end in mind." As the market fragments into a multitude of niches, meeting the specifications of a particular target becomes increasingly important. Having a clearly articulated plan to match management protocols to market(s) requirements allows for access to greater income opportunities. Similarly, preparing cattle for the breeding

herd requires precise approaches to assure high performance.

Collect and report data. The cost of doing business coupled with increasing levels of competition in the marketplace make data collection, assimilation and application increasingly important — not only to benchmarking internal performance within the enterprise, but to gain market access as well.

Without a sound information system, almost none of the previously mentioned value-adding efforts can be sustained. Good data allow management to make better decisions as the result of having access to trend lines and cost-benefit comparisons, as well as aligning information with cattle to better meet market demands.

Hold 'em accountable. Historically, the seedstock industry has loosened culling criteria when markets were favorable and profits were high. Unfortunately, such a course of action eventually undermines the long-term market position as too many cattle of questionable genetic merit or functionality are maintained as replacement stock. Holding a disciplined line on culling is of utmost importance to genetic improvement. As an added benefit, cull stock offer the seedstock breeder the resource from which to gather critical feedyard and carcass data. At a bare minimum, the culling criteria for a seedstock herd needs to be as stringent as that of the herd's best commercial customer.

So, as we enjoy the arrival of a new generation of cattle, let's plan to help them attain their highest value by committing ourselves to assuring they reach their full potential.

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Editor's Note: Tom Field is a professor at the Colorado State University (CSU) Department of Animal Sciences, where he is responsible for the seedstock cattle breeding program of the university teaching herd. He directs the Seedstock Merchandising Team and teaches Food Animal Sciences, Beef Production and Family Ranching. He is a contributor to the research efforts of the CSU Beef-Tec program. A frequent speaker at beef cattle events in the United States and internationally, Field is also a partner in his family's commercial cow-calf enterprise, which uses Angus as an important genetic component.