

Angus Stakes

► by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor

Chasing butterflies

Remember when you were a child, and you were asked to do something that you didn't know if you could? Maybe it was touching something slimy, saying hi to someone you were sweet on or getting up to give a speech in front of a crowd. The task was scary, but telling those who were encouraging you to try that you couldn't do it would have been far worse. Once the task was done, it seemed so simple.

That old feeling

Listening to the sessions at the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) annual symposium a few weeks ago gave me that butterfly feeling in the pit of my stomach I used to get before a big contest. On one hand, it's extremely exciting to see the progress we are making toward marker-assisted expected progeny differences (EPDs). On the other hand, it's a little scary.

Will we be able to handle it? If we are prone to single-trait select, what are the dangers in being able to single-gene select? How would selection for that one gene affect other traits? Will we narrow the diversity of the gene pool and cause problems down the road? Will it render breeds irrelevant? Will we overwhelm producers with things they have to consider to the point of making it not fun to raise seedstock ... or commercial cattle? Will we be able to make heads or tails of it? Will we be able to afford to use it?

All are relevant questions that we will

have to answer and resolve along the way; however, they are resolvable and they shouldn't stop us from taking that step.

Opportunities abound

In an age of higher input costs, predictability and quality reduce financial risk. Now, my old advertising professor would flinch at my using the word quality to describe a product. He preached the word meant something different to each consumer. So, let's say predictability and "quality as defined by the customer" reduce financial risk; thus, predictability and "describeability + branding + marketing to the right consumer" reduce risk.

With feedlots struggling financially, the ability to genetically describe calves to properly sort them into outcome groups can provide hope for more efficient management, reducing input costs and optimizing profit. That trickles back to the

cow-calf sector in what they can afford to pay for calves, which trickles back to what the commercial cattleman can afford to pay for bulls — especially those with higher-accuracy, more predictable performance.

Some may want to understand all the computations involved in calculating a marker-assisted EPD — and I hope they attend BIF every year to talk with the scientific minds there. Most cattlemen will benefit from higher-accuracy predictions on calves at younger ages for traits that we have available to us now, and marker-based EPDs for traits of economic importance that we don't have.

As far as breed relevance — a breed is just a subset of the bovine cattle population based on its genomic differences from other subsets. We can further define the breed, its complementarity with other breeds, and the true effects of heterosis among cattle in the national herd of today.

There's so much more opportunity, but no more space on this page. Visit www.bifconference.com for our coverage of the event. It's an exciting era to be a part of.



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