

# Producers Focus on Herd Sire Selection

K-State cow-calf specialist provides strategies to choose an appropriate herd sire.

by *Katie Allen and Connor Orrock, K-State Research and Extension*

**S**pring breeding season has arrived, and many cattle producers are likely thinking about selecting their next herd sire. This one decision could affect their profitability drastically, and with the stress of calving season, it is easy to get lost in sire information and make an investment that could be detrimental to the bottom line.

Bob Weaber, associate professor of beef breeding and genetics at Kansas State University (K-State), said it is important for cattle producers to think about their operation's breeding objective and goals. Producers need to evaluate their current herd performance and consider where they are performing adequately, as well as areas of needed improvement.

## Preparation before purchase

Like most things, preparation is crucial to bull buying. Weaber, a K-State Research and Extension cow-calf specialist, recommends that producers think about their marketing end point and put selection pressure on those areas.

If marketing or maintaining replacement heifers, for example, bulls with strong maternal predictors would be desired. In this case, producers should focus on expected progeny differences (EPDs) such as calving ease, milk and cow energy value. If marketing calves at weaning, growth EPDs should be the focus. If marketing calves on a grid, bulls with desired carcass predictors are the best choice.

In addition to the end-point focus, Weaber encourages producers to write down their immediate and long-term goals. Focusing on herd rebuilding, resource limitations and retaining replacement heifers might need to

be thought out. Choosing between cross- and straight-breeding should also be part of the selection process.

"I encourage producers, if they are thinking of or are in a crossbreeding system, to develop a planned system," Weaber said.

"Don't make a decision on short notice.

You'll pay for that for a number of years."

"The decisions we make buying bulls will have a lasting impact on our cow herd until at least 2025," he continued.

"The first-born daughters of bulls will grow a couple of years and be in production likely six, seven or eight calving cycles."

If planning to attend a bull sale, make sure to get a sale book as soon as possible, Weaber said. Use percentile tables and breed averages while going through the sale book, and find animals that excel in the traits identified through the breeding objective.

"If buying Angus bulls, for example, search online for 'Angus percentile table' and that will be a useful tool to evaluate how close to average or extreme an individual bull is for a particular trait within the population," Weaber said.

He recommends that producers make a list of suitable bulls that is about three times longer than the number of bulls needed. This is helpful in case bulls of interest sell for a price that is out of budget.

## Live inspection important

With list in hand, producers can use days leading up to sale day to inspect and sort through the bulls in person.

"If you can go a week or week and a half early, you'll have more leisure time going through the bulls, talking with the seedstock vendors about their program and maybe go look at cows if you're thinking of buying a bull to make replacement heifers," Weaber said. "Try to get a feel for how that cow herd

is managed. I encourage you to find one that mimics your own nutrition and management strategy."

Bull buying is a significant investment for producers, and Weaber said no one knows the bulls better than the seller. He suggests that producers take the opportunity to get recommendations from that person. Local extension agents could also provide assistance in matching a producer's goals to bulls available for purchase.

When examining bulls on the list previously ranked on performance data, focus heavily on structure, he said. Foot and leg structure of bulls is crucial to their longevity in the herd. Also, updated data will likely be available on sale day. It is important to make sure all bulls on the list still meet your requirements.

"Once you've gone through the phenotypic evaluation and knocked off bulls that don't fit for either body condition or feet and leg structure, find the sale order," Weaber said. "Often, the sale order is indicative of which bulls the seedstock vendor thinks are the most valuable. Take your list of bulls and the sale order, and make a new list. Put them in priority order based on your evaluation reflective of the order you would purchase them in one column. Next to that, reorder the list in sale order."

If a bull is at the top of the list for priority and sale order, the producer should consider bidding aggressively on him, he said. On the other hand, if a lower priority bull sells early, the producer should consider buying him only if he is at the right price. If that bull sells out of budget, the producer can let him pass and consider others on the list.

More information about beef breeding and genetics and bull-buying strategies can be found on the K-State Department of Animal Sciences and Industry website (<http://www.asi.k-state.edu/species/beef/research-and-extension/breeding-and-genetics.html>).



**Editor's Note:** Katie Allen is a communications specialist and news writer for K-State Research and Extension News. Connor Orrock is a sophomore at K-State studying agriculture communications and journalism.

