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What Cowmen Want

Beyond genetics, what is desired in the way of breeder services?

by *Troy Smith*

What do commercial cowmen really want from a seedstock supplier? Oh sure, they want bulls chock-full of “good genetics.” Admittedly, there are people only interested in a “cow freshener.” But most conscientious commercial producers can, with a little effort, identify sources of the genetics they seek. Often, a producer can find several different breeders offering bulls that represent a desired genetic package. How does that producer choose from whom to buy?

Curious about how the decision is made, this writer put the question to several commercial cow-calf producers. By no means was it a scientific survey. Chosen for telephone interviews were producers representing different geographic regions who were known to buy registered Angus bulls, or had advertised their home-raised, Angus-sired feeder cattle or replacement-quality females for sale. Interviews were based on cold calls, where each producer was informed of our purpose and asked if he would be willing to talk about criteria for choosing a seedstock supplier.

Some producers declined. Others were omitted from our “panel” of experts simply to reduce repetition and save space on the

printed page. Actually, some repetition remains in the following comments from five owners or managers of diverse commercial operations. That just underscores the points on which they and others agree. But, hopefully, their comments provide insight into what cowmen want, beyond genetics, in the way of breeder services. If not, at least it explains what these cowmen want and have come to expect.

Mike Livingston, Colorado

This spring, on the high plains of eastern Colorado, Mike Livingston will calve close to 700 females. The Stratton-area rancher prefers to attend local bull sales — at least during the February-March calving season. He and his wife, Julie, typically attend together, evaluating and buying bulls as a team. They prefer to buy from breeders offering large, consistent sire groups. Livingston sees that as a service through which breeders can help customers improve consistency in their commercial herds.

“We like to buy older bulls — 18 months to 2 years old,” Livingston states. “We like to buy half-brothers, choosing bulls from a particular sire group for heifers, and bulls from another sire group for cows. We’re

disappointed when a breeder uses too many different sires and offers only a few sons of each one.”

Livingston likes to view a seedstock supplier’s cow herd and see the mothers of the bulls he might buy. He also tries to visit with the breeder, his hired man or whoever it is that actually tends to the herd during calving. Some casual conversation while looking over the cows usually reveals what level of diligence goes into caring for the herd and the recordkeeping. He’s also interested in their style of husbandry, particularly when the cattle are handled.

“I’m a stickler for good temperament,” Livingston explains. “Genetics contribute to disposition, but how a seedstock outfit handles its cattle also makes a huge difference. I won’t put up with a snotty cow or bull, and I don’t want to buy bad disposition.”

Hempt Bros. Inc., Pennsylvania

Located in the Cumberland Valley of southeastern Pennsylvania, the commercial herd owned by George Hempt and family is managed by Roger Kopas. Due to a preference for dealing with a breeder one-on-

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one, nearly all bulls are purchased at private treaty from suppliers in the region.

“We prefer to do business with people we know pretty well. We like to have a breeder establish a personal relationship, build trust and show loyalty to the customer. And we do our best to reciprocate,” Kopas states.

“We certainly expect a breeder to stand behind his product. If there is a problem with a bull — low fertility or lack of libido — we expect it to be taken care of, or that breeder

won't see another Hempt Brothers dollar. We put a lot of stock in breeder integrity.”

Kopas believes breeders also should adhere to Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines, emphasize health care and have a herd biosecurity program. It speaks well of a breeder, Kopas says, when he provides extra assurances, like testing for bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) or DNA-testing for arthrogryposis multiplex (AM).

Doug Rutan, Oregon

On the high-desert ranges of eastern Oregon, near Jordan Valley, Doug Rutan and his father manage a fall-calving herd

of commercial cows. Rutan calls it an unforgiving kind of country, best-suited to easy-fleshing cattle of moderate size. While some breeders claim to offer bulls of moderate frame, Rutan looks for the real thing. He generally chooses from yearling bulls sold at auction.

“Setting the price through competitive bidding is fair for both buyer and seller,” Rutan says. “When you buy privately, you run the risk of getting there after the bulls have been picked over. At a production sale, everyone has the same chance to bid on the bull they want.”

Rutan believes most commercial

producers expect breeders to guarantee bulls for breeding soundness and to “make it right” when a bull doesn’t do his duty. However, Rutan would prefer to have his money refunded in such cases. If the breeder can’t replace the bull with one the buyer likes just as well, receiving credit toward a purchase at next year’s sale doesn’t fix the immediate problem.

“Usually, something happens to a bull when you need him most,” Rutan says. “I’d rather get my money back, so I can buy a bull to use now.”

Rutan also believes a breeder should take responsibility for transferring registrations to

buyers, and he appreciates seedstock suppliers who try to aid their customers’ marketing efforts.

“A breeder helped us buy the ear tags and get started with the AngusSource® program. We’ve had good luck with that. It has helped us market our cattle and, in the long run, it should help the breeder sell more bulls.”

Bobby Lovett, Georgia

In the Deep South, near Cuthbert, Ga., Bobby Lovett maintains a breeding herd of more than 400 females. There was a time when he bought only performance-tested bulls, but no more.

“We thought we had to buy the best-gaining bulls, but their usefulness was too short-lived. They’d been pushed too hard, too fast. They got too fat and didn’t get enough exercise. They just didn’t last,” Lovett says.

Now he prefers to buy 2-year-old bulls developed with minimal grain. Lovett usually buys bulls at auction, expecting to see a full complement of information in the sale book. He especially likes the Angus \$Value indexes as selection tools. He finds visual appraisal frustrating though, when the sale offering is displayed in small, crowded pens. Lovett also likes to see sale bulls grouped according to

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“kind or purpose.” For example, he likes to see bulls suitable for use on heifers displayed together.

Lovett says most seedstock suppliers seem to have good health programs, have their bulls examined for breeding soundness and offer similar guarantees. One thing that sets some apart is their attention to customers after the sale. A follow-up call or visit certainly reinforces Lovett’s regard for an individual breeder.

“Probably no more than a third of the people I’ve bought from over the years have done that,” Lovett states.

Phil McAnelly, Texas

For a long time, Phil McAnelly divided his time between teaching vocational agriculture and managing a Moore-area ranch in south Texas. He watched various breeds and cattle types come in and out of fashion, and admits to following a few fads himself. During recent years, ranching has been his only occupation and his program has been more focused.

“I’m striving to produce a high-quality carcass animal, but reproductive traits take priority. The economics of production are more important than ever,” McAnelly says.

“So, I’ve got some very definite ideas about what I look for in bulls and in a seedstock supplier. First of all, I want production of seedstock to be their livelihood; not their hobby. The economics of this business mean more to them when they actually make their living with cows.”

McAnelly looks for breeders with production goals similar to his own. Their philosophy should emphasize the maternal side of the equation. He wants to use bulls whose dams can survive and reproduce under harsh conditions. McAnelly is especially interested in bulls born to old cows with proven fertility and longevity.

Shying away from breeders who “sample semen from every sire in the AI catalog,” McAnelly prefers one that relies heavily on sires the breeder actually owns. McAnelly buys yearlings as well as 2-year-olds, as long as they haven’t been pen-developed with all the feed they can eat.

“Offering a first breeding-season guarantee is almost a standard practice these days, but it probably doesn’t mean much if the breeder isn’t honest and trustworthy. You want to trust the people you buy from — have confidence in them, as well as their cattle,” McAnelly says. “I’m looking for a relationship — hopefully a long one — with a breeder who is interested in getting to know his commercial customers, finding out what they need and want, and does his best to provide it.”

