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“Beef Production Strategies” article

“More of the Same” on Cattle Operations

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The phrase “more of the same” gives an impression of a lack of progress, not changing from the status quo or not improving. More of the same can mean not adopting new technologies or not adapting to current and projected conditions and, in that sense, can be detrimental on cattle operations. Yet more of the same can also refer to increasing uniformity and may be beneficial in several ways. Uniformity or consistency may be desirable in both management and marketing aspects of cattle production.

More of the Same Genetics

Consider a brood cow herd and ask these questions, “How consistent and predictable are my cattle from individual to individual?” and “How much variation in type and kind is present in the group?” When making mating decisions, it can be more challenging to select an appropriate bull to breed to a cow herd that is quite inconsistent in terms of breed composition, weight, frame size, muscling, milking ability, etc. By tightening up the breed makeup and trait performance levels of breeding females, the task of choosing a herd sire can focus more closely on matching the specific genetic improvement needs of the typical herd female. The breeder does not have to be as concerned about trying to find a herd sire that works well on females at far apart performance ends of a trait spectrum.

Putting in place planned crossbreeding programs is a means of working towards improved breed composition uniformity in commercial herds. The amount of hybrid vigor captured from crossbreeding systems depends upon the similarity or lack thereof of females and males mated together. To make best use of breed complementary and hybrid vigor, it is simpler to match sire breeds to breeding groups when the breeding group is more uniform in breed composition from the start.

Matching appropriate cattle genetics to production environment is critical for optimizing performance. When a producer finds cattle lines and breed compositions that perform well in a given production environment, it is logical that a uniform herd with those genetics may outperform a less uniform herd that contains some cattle that are not as adapted to perform well in that setting. Matching is the key word here. Match cattle to the production environment for best results. By doing this, cattle will be more uniform in their adaptability to the local environment.

More of the Same Birth Dates

Controlled breeding and calving season, controlled breeding and calving season, controlled breeding and calving season. Enough said. By managing breeding dates to have cattle bred within a defined and limited time frame, much is accomplished. Uniformity to breeding dates naturally means that the subsequent calving dates will be uniform.

There are numerous advantages to this from a management perspective. It allows for closer monitoring of calving when all calves are expected to be born within a tight time window as opposed to watching for calves year round. Management practices such as vaccinations and weaning can be done at one time to calves close in age and help to avoid extra cattle handling events or poor timing of management practice implementation.

Having more calves of similar age facilitates contemporary grouping of more head in each group. Performance calculation standards such as for adjusted weights specify that cattle be within particular age ranges when data are collected. Having more uniform calving dates makes choosing weight collection dates more flexible in accommodating performance calculation standards before cattle in a group start to fall outside of allowable age windows for data collection.

Arguably one of the greatest advantages to implementing a controlled breeding program is when it is done in a way that best matches cattle nutrient demands by stage of production to forage-based nutritional programs. Having the periods when the most nutrients per land area available from grazing match up with the periods when the herds have the greatest need for those nutrients makes economic sense and can reduce the need for additional labor and expense associated with providing supplemental feeds or mechanically harvest stored forages to cattle.

More of the Same Performance and Products

Here is where marketing meets uniformity to improve returns. In general, as variation in a group of cattle being offered for sale decreases, potential buyers recognize reduced risk in matching those cattle to a certain target. This concept is no different than what occurs in financial markets. Borrowers with good credit histories and other desirable features to lenders are considered less risky than borrowers with worse credit histories and other financial causes for concern. Thus, the borrowers who appear to be less risky tend to get better interest rates and other terms on their loans.

In marketing groups of cattle, it is to the seller's advantage to convince potential buyers that their cattle present less risk in terms of expected group performance. When cattle buyers are aware that a group of cattle for sale are quite uniform in economically important characteristics such as muscling and weight, they may reward sellers with higher prices paid for those cattle. Of course, capturing premiums for uniform cattle is applicable only when cattle are sold in groups. Going back to the discussions of genetics and age, improving uniformity in those and other features of a herd facilitates groupings of more head together that meet narrow specifications. This marketing strategy is especially profitable when relatively similar cattle can be offered for sale in potload lots.

More Ideas and Resources

These are just some of the practical implications of making management decisions that increase herd uniformity. When cattle producers determine what cattle genetics and controlled calving seasons work well for their production settings, they can work towards producing "more of the same" cattle that fit those specifics. When producers develop a

reputation with cattle buyers for good cattle that perform as expected, those buyers may demand “more of the same” cattle from those producers in the future and compensate them financially for providing such animals.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service or visit msucares.com/livestock/beef.