

Don't Forget Mama

by Ron Bolze, RAAA Director of Commercial Marketing

Over time, our Red Angus seedstock and commercial industries have recognized EPDs as the single most important source of information to achieve genetic change at a faster rate. The Red Angus breed is blessed with the most completely, accurately, genetically described cattle as a result of the vision of earlier leadership resulting in the implementation of mandatory performance reporting and mandatory Total Herd Reporting (THR).



Diligently search for that old, proven mother cow and use her son who is sired by a bull that is a proven producer of excellent females.

Indeed, those Red Angus breeders who have embraced EPDs over the years, have captured the bulk of the commercial market. Those Red Angus breeders that want to maintain or capture more of the commercial market must include EPDs as one of the tools for sire selection. Unfortunately, most Red Angus breeders can not afford to own the sires that have the potential to make the fastest genetic change possible. However, these sires are usually available through artificial insemination (AI). It has been said that EPDs and AI are the two great equalizers because they essentially "level the playing field" to enable all breeders to be able to provide the same genetics to their commercial customers.

It's that time of year again to select your next AI sire or natural service herd sire. You have done your homework. You have found the perfect bull. According to your well-thought-out selection plan, he has the perfect balance of EPDs for the four categories of Red Angus genetic documentation - reproduction, growth, maintenance and carcass characteristics. He has a stacked pedigree for these same traits, with a sire and maternal grand sire with similar EPDs. Their EPDs have high accuracy values. Your bull prospect has impeccable individual performance, ratioing far superior to all of his contemporaries. He is the right frame score for your selection scheme, heavily muscled, structurally correct, and free and easy moving on a big foot. He excels in scrotal cir-

cumference and passed his breeding soundness exam with flying colors. His ultrasound scan ratios are impeccable. To top it off, he possesses unsurpassed eye appeal. He is truly the sire of the next generation, capable of changing all the things that need to be corrected in your current cow herd and that of your commercial clientele. You have truly done your homework. Right? Maybe.

Although this scenario represents far more thought and planning than most cattle producers have traditionally committed to the selection of their next AI or herd sire, a potential oversight still exists. Don't Forget Mom.

Many AI sires and herd bulls are selected without regard for the bottom side of the pedigree. Sure, cow data are reflected in the sire's individual performance and EPDs, however, a number of additional questions need to be answered for more complete analysis of the next sire.

How about the mother's longevity and lifetime productivity?

Many seedstock breeders turn the generations to maximize the rate of genetic change, however, the number of years a cow remains functionally productive is of great importance, particularly to the commercial producer. Cow longevity is of economic importance through the resulting reduction in female replacement rate. Expensive heifer

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development expenses can be minimized by reducing female replacement through increased cow longevity. Reducing replacement rate is a huge economic driver for commercial producers. There are reasons why old cows are still productive long after herd mates have been culled. Reasons that are not currently quantified and may never be quantified through an EPD. A "produce of dam" summary on any and all Red Angus cows in a breeders' herd can be generated.

How about functional traits?

Cow longevity is driven by functional traits. Does the bull's mother have a functional, sound udder, evaluated at calving, not weeks or months later? Why propagate bad uddered daughters by using a sire from a bad uddered cow? Is she sound on her feet and legs? Has she ever required a foot trimming? How about body condition or fleshing ability under practical, commercial conditions? Would she maintain her flesh without a change in your management or feed resources? How's her disposition? AI sires and herd sires should come from cows managed similar to yours.

How about regularity of calving?

Calving interval is one measure. Ideally, sires should come from cows that calve early every year. Has she been forced to conceive for many years during defined (60 days) breeding seasons (reproductive pressure) with minimal supplementation?

How big is the cow?

Would she fit your operation and maintain her productivity without changing your management and feed resources? If she is big, is she "pounds big" or "inches big"? Cattle that weigh more for a given frame score tend to be easier fleshing resulting in less maintenance. Rapid early growth is certainly important in cattle production, however, extended growth associated with larger frame scores represents increased cow size and expensive maintenance requirements. Commercial producers will usually produce more, higher valued total "herd" pounds of calf from an increased number of more moderate framed,

deeper ribbed, easier fleshing cows, even though individual calf weaning weight may decrease. Inventory is a huge economic driver.

If she's an older cow, does she have daughters in production?

If so, have they performed, calved regularly and been functional under practical, commercial conditions? Does she have sons in service in other herds? If so, have they performed?

In short, is she the kind of cow that you would want your entire cow herd to be?

Diligently search for that old, proven mother cow and use her son who is sired by a bull that is a proven producer of excellent females. Yes, this means a focus on predominately older, proven, higher accuracy sires. The Red Angus breed is a maternal breed. Let's focus on the "elite" females of the breed. Only you can define "elite" for your program.

Without question, EPDs represent the single best source of genetic information for effective AI and herd sire selection. High accuracy EPDs, as a selection tool, can do a masterful job of making directional change in cow herd output (such as growth and carcass characteristics). Fortunately, EPDs currently available through the RAAA, can also account for the input side of the profit equation (cost of production). EPDs such as direct and maternal calving ease, yearling heifer pregnancy, stayability, and mature cow energy maintenance represent the Red Angus breeds' unfair advantage as our industry charts a new course through an environment characterized by dramatic increases in energy costs.

Sires with similar EPDs may have mothers that differ drastically in productivity and structural and reproductive soundness when they are expected to perform under practical, intensively managed forage programs with minimal supplementation. After all, just like sires, not all cows are created equal. **Do all your homework - Don't Forget Mama! ■**

