

Management Update

Bull Selection Goals

Different cow-calf operations have different goals and different resources. Yet bull selection goals for any cow-calf herd should target an acceptable combination of traits that complement the strengths and weaknesses of the cow herd and match target markets. When selecting a bull, consider the needs of the cow herd. Ask questions that will help match a bull to the cow herd. Do weaning weights need to be improved? If so, growth performance is a priority in the selection process. Does calf crop color uniformity need improvement? If so, color pattern inheritance is an important consideration in bull selection. Will the bull be bred to heifers and is limited labor available to assist with calving? If either is the case, calving ease is a priority. Are there plans to retain ownership of calves beyond the feedlot and market them on a value-based pricing grid? If so, attention needs to focus on yearling weights and carcass traits in selecting breeding animals.

Other factors to consider in bull selection include structural soundness, conformation, libido, disposition, scrotal circumference, sheath, frame size, muscling, breed, and horn presence or absence. Try to strike a balance amongst economically relevant traits and avoid extremes. The type of bull selected also needs to be based on the purpose of the bull in the breeding herd. Will the bull be used as a terminal sire on mature cows, will he be bred to heifers, or will he be used to sire replacement heifers? The answers to these questions will impact the emphasis that needs to be placed on maternal traits. The idea of developing a "want ad" for the cow herd is not a new concept. Yet it is still a useful approach to evaluating the cow herd and prioritizing herd sire needs. Consider what a want ad for herd sires might say for a particular breeding herd.

Fifty-head mature cow herd seeks bulls to improve calf genetics. Must be able to pass a breeding soundness evaluation and effectively perform herd sire duties within a 75-day breeding season. Expected progeny differences and performance information required. Must offer performance traits that complement existing herd genetics. Bulls without documentation of a complete herd health program need not apply. *Source: Mississippi State Ag Extension*

Planning For Purchasing Bulls

No matter what the source, knowledgeable bull procurement requires prior planning. Stay informed of upcoming sale dates, times, and locations by monitoring industry publications and websites. Make sure that catalog and mailing list addition requests are made in a timely manner. Take time to scan through bull sale catalogs in advance of sales where potential herd sires will be purchased.

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Bull registration numbers are typically listed in sale catalogs. They can be obtained directly from breeders as well. Registration numbers allow bull buyers to "do their homework" behind the scenes. Breed association websites have search tools that not only allow for individual bulls to be researched, but also relatives including progeny (calves) out of the bulls or out of the bulls' parents. Calving intervals of dams, performance ratios, current expected progeny differences (EPDs), pedigrees, and birth dates are some examples of data that are easily accessible on the Internet for many breeds. Sometimes after sale catalogs are printed, EPDs are updated prior to the sale. Looking up current EPDs on sale lots of interest can provide more reliable information about the sale offering in this case.

An easy step when sorting through sale lots is to eliminate bulls that obviously do not match selection goals. Then effort should be put in to ranking the remaining herd sire candidates. A "short list" that ranks the bulls on paper and lists all bulls that should be evaluated at the sale site should be prepared before the sale. In the case of production sales and even consignment sales, the ranches of origin can be visited ahead of time to view the sale offering. The short list of prospective bulls for purchase can then be refined.

Farm visits are ideal times evaluate cattle type and structural soundness and to ask questions about herd health specifics, bull nutritional programs, and herd performance records. Viewing in-herd relatives of bulls being considered for purchase is another reason to schedule a farm visit. Dams, sires, full siblings, and half siblings may be available for evaluation. Breeders may even recommend that prospective buyers visit with past satisfied customers about their bull purchases and resulting calf crops. Make any financial and hauling arrangements prior to a bull sale. Determine how many bulls are needed, and then plan the dollar amount that can be spent on herd sires. Sale catalogs likely include sale terms and conditions including any hauling arrangements that may be available in conjunction with the sale. Any questions or concerns about these terms and conditions should be inquired about with sale management before the sale.

Immediately prior to a bull sale, arrive in plenty of time to walk through and evaluate the sale offering several times. Breeders are frequently present at the sale site and available to answer any last minute questions about their cattle and special arrangements such as hauling. Make final decisions on which bulls are worthy of purchase, and determine a final ranking of the sale lots. Closely evaluate the sale order. Having several bulls selected as potential purchases and determining a maximum bid for each of these bulls should consider the sale order and how that may affect the buying scenario. Once the purchasing plan is in place, settle in for the sale in enough time to have a good view of the sale offering and bidding action. *Source: Mississippi State Ag Extension* ■