

Retained ownership of calves

by Gary Fike, RAAA Director of Commercial Marketing

Many commercial cow-calf operators have a firm grasp of the performance of their cows. Record keeping has helped ranchers determine which females are getting it done in means of longevity, which cows to cull (bad udders, disposition, feet and legs, etc.), and weaning weights on their calves. However, very few have information on the feeding performance of their calves after they leave the ranch, and an even smaller percentage receives carcass data information.

It may be that the same buyer is purchasing Ranch "A" calves at the auction barn year after year and why they bring more money than those from Ranch "B." Why would you suppose? Because the buyer knows something that the rancher doesn't; that is, how the cattle perform past the point of sale. Therein lies their advantage. Rancher "A" might not be receiving the full value for his hard work; while Rancher "B" may actually be getting more for his calves than they're worth!

There are several reasons why ranchers do not retain ownership. Financial obligations due at a certain time of

year, tax implications or is it somewhat a fear of the unknown?

Large operators have the option of feeding a load of calves and selling the others, not putting all their eggs in one basket. Smaller operators may need to pool calves with others to fill a feedlot pen. There are state steer and heifer futurities, often sponsored by land grant universities. The Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity program in Iowa would certainly be an option. Ranchers wanting to spread risk may own a percentage of the calves, usually 50 percent, through harvest with the feedlot and still receive the valuable information.

Carcass data information includes hot carcass weight, dressed yield, ribeye area, fat thickness, marbling score, and calculated yield grade. Given this information, ranchers can make even better decisions about their genetic selections in the future.

Following is a real-life example: A rancher who never before had retained ownership found that his cattle had an extraordinarily high percentage of

Yield Grade 4 and 5 carcasses (overly fat) the first time. Looking through his carcass data with him revealed that the ribeye area on his calves left a lot to be desired. For example, an 800-lb. carcass should have a 13.6 square-inch ribeye, on average. Many of his were less than 12.0 inches. Ribeye area is one of the contributing factors in calculating yield grade.

So, not only were the cattle overly fat, they were light muscled as well, compounding his problems. He needed to select future herd sires that had REA EPDs in the top 10 percent of the breed to dig himself out of that hole. Likewise, for the cattle he had, his quality grades were low; so emphasis on marbling EPDs was also warranted.

Don't get me wrong, looking at the cattle in the pasture lead me to believe that these were some of the best cattle walking. However, after pulling the hides off, a different story was revealed.

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