

Make decisions with the end goal in mind

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Often when beef cattle producers make management, breeding, or culling decisions, it is with a short term goal in mind. That goal is often improving profits or animal performance. However, it is important to remember that the ultimate goal of any beef producer should be to produce a high quality wholesome product for the consumer that they can feel good about eating. We want consumers to come back to beef again and again because they know it's safe, good for them, and tastes good! Consumers today are increasingly demanding more knowledge of how their food is produced, and want to know that animals are treated well. While many Mississippi cattlemen are removed from the final segment of beef production, we still play a vital role in producing beef for the future.

A fact that often makes us pause is that the selection decisions producers are making now will ultimately wind up on someone's plate in 3 years. Take a second and let that sink in. The bull you are selecting to use in your herd today or in the spring will have a big impact on the steak that will be in your plate in 3 years. Because we want to produce a high quality product, and want consumers to have a good eating experience, we must consider how our breeding and management decisions will affect that eating experience.

Let's consider what makes a good eating experience. Eating quality of a steak can be divided into several categories: tenderness, palatability, minimum excess fat, portion size, consistency, and uniformity. Because beef is raised in many diverse environments, consistency can be difficult, but if producers are mindful of optimal characteristics, and aim for these traits it can serve to improve the uniformity of an individual producer's calves. This starts with your cowherd. A consistent calf crop is produced from a uniform cow herd.

While industry targets may fluctuate based on market conditions, producers can strive to produce cattle with certain carcass characteristics that fit what consumers prefer. This means targeting cattle that produce an 11 to 15 in² ribeye, with 0.25 to 0.5 in of fat thickness over that ribeye. Yield grades should be targeted to less than 3.0, and we should strive to produce carcasses that into the high Select to high Choice Quality Grade. Consumer surveys have shown that this produces a desirable portion size that consumers will want to select from the meat case or at a restaurant.

There are several tools available to help producers meet these goals when making breeding decisions. For the commercial producer, much of this information and tools is often used in selecting the herd bull. Expected Progeny Differences (EPD) offer bull buyers the best estimate of a bull's genetic potential, and in turn how we can expect his progeny to perform compared to the average within his breed. There are EPDs available for carcass traits for most registered breeds. The basic information will often include Ribeye Area, Fat Thickness, and Marbling. For more information on EPDs and genetic selection, refer to Mississippi State University Extension Service publication 2491, Expected Progeny Differences and Selection Indices for Beef Cattle Selection. Carcass ultrasound can also be used to evaluate carcass performance of the live animal, and is used by breed associations to improve the predictability of carcass EPDs. For more information on ultrasound, refer to Mississippi State University Extension Service publication 2509, Ultrasound Scanning Beef Cattle for Body Composition.

While the majority of cow/calf producers in Mississippi may market calves at weaning, there is still a big impact on the nation's beef supply. It is important for cattlemen and women to have a clear target in mind when making breeding decisions, and to strive to produce a consistent product that the consumer wants to eat. Knowing your market is important, and producing cattle that fit that market well is important. We are fortunate in the beef business that there are many marketing options and many consumers available who choose to feed beef to their families. Remember that it is important to tell our beef story that we as beef producers are proudly providing consumers with a safe, healthy, wholesome product.

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