

Replacement heifers: A valuable commodity

Dr. Brandi Bourg – Extension Beef Cattle Specialist, Mississippi State University

With last year's drought and herd liquidations in Texas and Oklahoma, and a decline in cow herd numbers over recent years, conditions have combined to make the replacement heifer a very valuable commodity. Record high prices have many cow-calf producers eager to sell their entire calf crop at weaning, without thinking of the need to replace the older cows in their herds. For most beef cow herds, the replacement rate is close to 15%, meaning that every 6 to 7 years the herd will completely turn over. With diminishing cattle supplies, feedyards are scrambling to fill empty pens, and the recent Cattle on Feed report indicated that the number of heifers on feed were up 6% from a year ago. As the nation begins to slowly rebuild herd numbers, the replacement heifer quickly becomes a very valuable commodity. All of these factors add up to a need to an increased need to have access to a supply of high quality replacement heifers, with a decreased supply of heifers available.

Often the decision to buy or raise replacement heifers can be a complicated one, and the financial and management implications must be considered carefully. Every operation has different goals they strive to meet, ranging from genetic improvement to improved efficiency of that operation. Resources, such as added labor, land, and management, must be considered. Many smaller operations simply do not have these added resources available to raise replacement heifers, and manage their development separately from the cowherd.

Many producers may not consider all costs associated with raising their own replacements. Financial factors such as interest rate, cash flow needs, labor costs, reproductive rates, additional feed costs, or the value of that heifer if she were to be sold off the farm as a weaned calf, must be factored in to the decision. The price and availability of quality replacement heifers must also be taken into consideration, as well as genetic improvement potential from these heifers. An operation which only uses natural service and does not replace herd sires often, may be able to use purchased replacement heifers as a way to more quickly introduce higher performing genetics into the herd.

If the decision is made to purchase replacement heifers, it is important to determine the characteristics desired in those heifers. Purchased replacements should possess genetic and phenotypic traits at the same level or above the current levels in the herd. Finding a source of replacements with similar goals and the ability to improve the gene pool of the herd may seem a daunting task, however there are many tools available to make this task less daunting. Genetic markers and EPDs can shed light on the genetic potential of a young animal.

Breed type is also an important consideration when considering a source for replacement heifers. While the use of purebred bulls in a commercial operation is often desired, the use of purebred females is not. The crossbred cow allows an operation to take advantage of improved reproductive efficiency and increased growth through hybrid vigor. This is particularly noted in the Brahman cross female, which makes her so desirable in the Southern US.

A source of replacement heifers must also meet several other criteria. Location is one important consideration. Heifers are typically best adapted to the environment in which they were raised, and may not perform to their full potential in drastically different environments. In other words, it is not advised that an operation on the Gulf coast purchase its replacement heifers from a source in South Dakota. Temperament is also a factor that should not be overlooked when purchasing females to add to your herd. Temperament has been shown to be heritable, i.e. if a heifer is high strung, it is likely that her calves will be high strung as well. Since a heifer's temperament can be influenced by handling, it is important to have an idea of the animal handling practices used by the potential source of replacements.

Whether developing retained heifers, purchasing bred heifers, or providing custom development services, the practices outlined in the Miss Premium Replacement Heifer Program are the foundation for a successful program. Proper replacement heifer development and management practices are fundamental to reproductive success. One of the main goals of the Miss Premium Heifer Development Program is to increase the implementation of heifer development practices that will result in optimum reproductive efficiency as mature cows. To be eligible for certification in the program, heifers must meet minimum vaccination requirements, pelvic measurements, be bred to eligible sires, and either be AI bred or be bred within a 65 day natural service breeding season. Heifers certified through the program can also be marketed through approved sales, so when a heifer carries a Miss Premium Heifer ear tag a buyer can have confidence that she was managed to allow her optimum reproductive success as a mature cow.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit <http://msucares.com/livestock/beef/heifer.html> to learn more about the Miss Premium Heifer Development Program.