



# Things to Do Before Purchasing a Bull

by **Brett Barham**, University of Arkansas division of agriculture

**I** know many producers spend many hours in the process of purchasing a bull. It's a big decision — one that can affect your herd for many years beyond the expected usefulness of the bull due to his daughters remaining in production. It pays to do some homework on determining what kind of bull you need prior to purchase. Here are some steps to help guide you through the process:

## 1) Identify herd goals

Herd goals serve as the foundation for sire selection and provide guidance as to traits with the most economic importance. Defining the production and marketing system, along with management strategies and environment, is the key factor that warrants consideration.

- Will the bull be used on heifers, mature cows or both?
- Will replacement females be retained in the herd?
- How will the calf crop be marketed (sell at weaning, retain ownership, sell females)?
- What are the labor and management resources available?
- What are the feed resources and environmental conditions of the operation?
- How will this sire contribute to the overall breeding system plan?

## 2) Assess herd strengths and weaknesses

Fundamental records are key to identifying strengths and weaknesses. Basic performance parameters such as calving percentage and dates, weaning percentage, weaning weights, sale weights, carcass data, feed usage, etc., are necessary to serve as the basis for assessing areas of strength and those needing attention. This type of information is extremely important considering the high input costs and low operating margins of today's markets.

## 3) Establish selection priorities

Concentrate on those factors that stand to have the largest effect on profitability. Remember that income is derived from performance (sale weight, percent calf crop weaned, carcass merit, etc.). Performance is a function of both genetics and environment/management. Superior genetics can be negated by poor management, which emphasizes the importance of separating the effect of management (nutrition, health program) from that of genetics when specific priorities for the herd are established. Considering both the genetic and management influences on various traits is important. Focus on a handful of priority traits rather than attempting to change many traits simultaneously. Establishing a few traits to focus on is the key factor.

## 4) Utilize selection tools

Once selection priorities have been established through close examination of herd goals and current status, a number of useful tools are at the disposal of beef producers to assist in making genetic improvement. Genetic differences across breeds have been well established, and utilization of different breeds in a complementary fashion through structured crossbreeding plans provides the opportunity for improvement in multiple traits.

Most importantly, heterosis attained through crossbreeding has been shown to have significant favorable impact on traits such as reproductive efficiency and cow longevity, which are critical for herd profitability. The limited ability to select for reproductive traits in the form of expected progeny differences (EPDs) further emphasizes the importance of capturing the value of heterosis.

EPDs are available for many traits of economic importance. The introduction of economic indexes, which combine several related traits and their economic values into one EPD, are available to assist with simultaneous improvement in multiple traits which impact areas such as carcass merit and post-weaning profit. Again, with the large number of EPD tools available, the critical step is to determine the EPDs which are most important and to establish benchmarks relative to each.

## 5) Establish benchmarks

Several tools can be used to help determine EPD specifications. EPD values for current and past sires can be used as benchmarks. With these benchmarks, EPD specifications can be set to reflect the desired increase or moderation in performance for a particular trait. As an example, establishing a benchmark for milk EPD can be determined through the relationship between previous sires' genetics for milk and the performance of their daughters in the herd.

## 6) Find a source

With the above defined, you can now begin to look at individual bulls. There are many sources for bulls that warrant consideration — production sales, test stations and private treaty sales. Of critical importance is that the bull be from a reputable source which will stand behind its product. It may be necessary to look at several sources in order to find the correct bull.

## 7) Do your homework

The first step to doing so is to evaluate the sale catalog, performance pedigree and data. By examining the bull's performance record, determine

which bulls meet the EPD and other specifications that have been established (and, likewise, eliminate those that do not meet the specifications). Be prepared to make tradeoffs, as the perfect record may not be attainable. Do not be surprised or alarmed when the bulls you have highlighted appear scattered throughout the sale order. Remember to stick to the selection criteria and qualifications/specifications that have been established. All this can and should be accomplished prior to departing for any sale.

## 8) Have a look

Once the list has been narrowed to only bulls which meet the criteria, these bulls can be further evaluated and the selection refined. Having a list of suitable bulls prior to arrival at the auction or farm will not only save time but also assist in making sure the right bull for the situation is purchased. After narrowing the potential candidates on paper, the bulls can be evaluated for suitability of phenotypic traits and the potential candidate list can be shortened even further. Not all relevant traits have EPDs (examples include disposition, foot soundness, fleshing ability, etc.) and, therefore, must be evaluated visually.

## 9) Make a sound investment

For many cow-calf producers, purchasing a new bull is a relatively infrequent occurrence. This emphasizes the importance of selecting the right bull, particularly in single-sire herds. The value of the right bull cannot be overestimated. Investments in good genetics will pay dividends, both short- and long-term, through the influence the bull has on each calf crop as well as his daughters if they are retained in the herd.

## 10) Manage the new bull properly

Of equal importance is the care and management of the newly acquired bull. Proper management and nutrition are essential for the bull to perform satisfactorily during the breeding season. With most new herd sires purchased as yearling bulls, management prior to, during and after the first breeding season is particularly important. Plan ahead by acquiring a new yearling bull at least 60 to 90 days prior to the breeding season so ample time is available to allow for adjustment to a new environment, commingling with other bulls and getting the bull in proper breeding body condition. **HW**