

Contemporary Groups Key to Good Data Collection



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During this first quarter of 2012, the beef cattle industry is seeing unprecedented prices, and these include the value and demand for Hereford genetics. As I write this column, there have already been three Hereford production sales that have grossed more than \$1 million.

In addition, most sales are reporting record averages with the demand continuing to grow for Hereford genetics that are well documented and backed with integrity.

Perhaps the biggest factor for this increase in demand is that the commercial industry has recognized that heterosis is a vital part of the profitability within the industry. Even though the industry is seeing record prices, the margins are still tight because of the increase in input costs.

So, the challenge is still to see more calves and pounds per cow exposed, and those two things are solved with heterosis. The maternal effect is so important. Remember that fertility is a lowly heritable trait, and crossbreeding can fix that issue in one generation.

In addition, the American Hereford Association (AHA) has shown the industry that you can get incremental help with efficiency, health and growth while maintaining carcass merit. Do not let anyone tell you that using Hereford genetics will have a negative impact on carcass quality or yield. There are

plenty of Hereford genetics that can provide value at all levels of production including carcass.

As you make breeding decisions this spring, you need to look very closely at your breeding program and make sure you understand the needs of your customers. This task is so important for many reasons. The Hereford breed is now a breed of choice for many in the commercial industry, and even more importantly the beef industry is faced with challenges of a growing demand for protein worldwide.

Importance of contemporary groups

The AHA has developed the tools for you to use to make informed and documented decisions. Whole-herd reporting is still the key component to adding value to the AHA performance program. Last month, I touched briefly on how a breeder must participate and stay compliant. This month, I would like to touch on the importance of proper contemporary grouping.

Beef cattle evaluation is complex, and it will need to start properly by evaluating herd mates that are raised in a similar environment. In other words, how did the animal perform within its contemporary group?

Contemporary grouping in the genetic evaluation is an attempt to account for environmental effects so that the remaining effects among

animals more closely reflect heritable differences among them. So, a contemporary group is defined as a set of cattle of the same breed, sex and age, raised in the same basic environment and given the same opportunity to perform.

Three of these things are handled at the AHA. Of course, we are one breed, next we split them by sex and then we age slice every 60 days. Age-slicing will take the oldest calf of each group and sort the calves every 60 days, and this process is the same for every trait. The final step is up to the breeder. As long as all of your calves have had the same opportunity to perform, you should submit them all as one group. If you have given special attention to a set of cattle, like extra feed to young cows or creep feed to a special set of calves, then those need to be given a different management code.

The concluding message to this process is that breeders will get the most accurate and useful information by keeping groups as large as they can and by using multiple sires with at least one high accuracy sire within each group.

Again, the opportunities for Hereford genetics are endless, so continue to collect sound and accurate records and make breeding decisions with your mind and not your heart.

For more on contemporary grouping, see "In Good Company" Page 46 of the August 2010 *Hereford World* or visit Hereford.org and search "contemporary group." **HW**

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Crowne Plaza Hotel, Houston

April 18-20

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