



Genetic Summit Reveals 'Game Changing' Opportunity

The recent Hereford Genetic Summit hosted at Missouri State University in Springfield, Mo., Sept. 4-5 could be considered a threshold event for driving the direction for Hereford breed improvement over the next decade.

These types of conferences have historically assessed the status of the Hereford breed population and where it conforms or falls behind in commercial demand. They have always been threshold events creating selection shifts for genetic improvement. This latest event could become the bellwether event that encourages Hereford breeders to create more value in Hereford genetics than we've seen in quite some time.

The first Hereford type conference, deemed the Madison type conference, was hosted at the University of Wisconsin in 1969. That conference ushered in the performance and frame race of the 1970s and '80s that moved the Hereford breed two full frame scores larger, increased calf weights to nearly 70 lb. heavier at weaning, produced more than 100 lb. of additional carcass weight, and generated nearly \$200 per head of added value over the following 20 years.

In 1996 the World Hereford Conference hosted at Colorado State University attempted to quantify the change in performance and end-product quality, ushering in the era of carcass ultrasound technology and end-product improvement. Since that time, the Hereford breed has made

amazing advances in overall muscling and ribeye area, again contributing to larger carcass weight and more saleable end product.

By the next Hereford Direction Summit hosted at Oklahoma State University in 2002, it was determined that the Hereford breed had all but caught the Continental breeds in growth, had plenty of milk production to support crossbreeding systems but might have gone too far on mature size while ignoring very important components for the commercial cow-calf sector — birth weight and calving ease.

For the next 10 years of the new millennium, Hereford breeders worked diligently on the No. 1 trait of interest for the cow-calf sector — calving ease. The breed has identified high accuracy sires, has begun to stack pedigrees with spread (calving ease and high growth) cattle and, in turn, has made great strides that have created a major demand shift for the Hereford breed.

2014 Hereford Genetic Summit speaker Lorna Marshall, Genex Cooperative U.S. beef marketing manager, said, "I had once been very critical of the Hereford breed because it had gotten out of bounds relative to calving ease and had functional problems to fix, but in the last six years the Hereford breed has been the fastest-growing breed for both domestic and export semen sales."

Marshall said she was impressed with the improvements the Hereford breed has made in improving calving ease and eliminating functional defects that plagued the Hereford breed for decades. She also complimented the American Hereford Association (AHA) for being the first breed to launch an udder quality EPD (expected progeny difference). Many stereotypical factors that harmed Hereford breed market share have been resolved, and now the breed finds itself growing in favor with the commercial cattle industry.

So where does the Hereford breed go from here? The AHA invited leading experts in the field of consumer marketing, cattle feeding,

industry economics and cow-calf production, along with two of the largest seedstock suppliers in the U.S., to share their views on a changing industry and where the breed might head during the next 10 years to capture additional profit opportunity.

A changing consumer, growing high-quality domestic and export markets, increased input costs, economic and environmental sustainability, value disparity in feeder cattle, and concerns about animal welfare were all major issues touched on during the Summit. Here are a few bullet points taken from the conference.

- **Quality rules:** Due to the record high price for beef, the demand for a tender, adequately marbled product is growing for both domestic and export consumers. The U.S. beef industry's unique global advantage is the production of high-quality, grain-fed beef. It has a major advantage in consumer satisfaction compared to grass-fed beef that is produced throughout the rest of the world. Therefore, the Hereford breed must continue to focus on quality by improving quality grade and to evaluate genetic components of tenderness to sustain and to grow market share.

- **Live calves born is king:** The three most important commercial cow-calf traits identified in the 2014 *BEEF Magazine* cattlemen survey are calving ease, fertility and disposition.

For the most part, the Hereford breed can claim disposition as a unique strength. However, increasing live calves born should be the most important factor of the seedstock industry. The Hereford breed must be relentless at producing calving ease without giving up growth. In addition, it might be time to evaluate our management methods for developing young bulls to determine if we are producing structurally sound athletes with good feet and legs, and are making sure bulls are in breeding shape, ready to cover country, to produce viable semen and to last for at least four years. There is

no debate on the importance of the two areas of calving ease and fertility coupled with breeding ability.

- **Change feeder calf value:** One of the knocks on the Hereford breed is the occasional discount that red-hided cattle tend to get in sale barns or on the video. It has been said that we have made good strides in reducing the disparity in black versus red hide price, but there is also a major opportunity ahead of the Hereford breed once it capitalizes on a couple of factors.

Unquestionably, feed efficiency is a trait that could be a "game changer" for the business once it's identified, quantified genetically and selected for by using calculated EPDs. The Hereford breed can claim feed efficiency as its own. Combining feed efficiency while improving end-product quality will undoubtedly be the "game changer" the breed is looking for within three generations. Look for news of a feed efficiency EPD coming in the next few months.

Summit speaker Randy Blach, CattleFax CEO, said, "I would challenge you, that this is the time to make some investments in the future of your business. You've got some jingle in your pocket, make some of those investments that are going to pay dividends, 10 and 20 years down the road. It doesn't matter what kind of business we are in, we all have things that we can improve."

In the coming weeks and months, I encourage Hereford breeders to look at the new genomic technology that is rapidly advancing and that can be used to improve the accuracy of your younger animals' EPDs. You will soon find a very attractive new price point for a combined GE-EPD (genomic enhanced-EPD), parent verification and genetic abnormality panel. We will commercially launch the udder score EPD, and in the next fiscal year, a feed efficiency EPD will be published.

In the words of Randy Blach, let's invest while we have jingle in our pockets. **HW**



AHA President Steve Lambert shared exciting news with attendees announcing the 2014 Fiscal Year end figures. He reported increases across the board, including registrations up 5.2%, transfers up 12.1% and cow inventory up 6.7%.

