

# Recognizing the Best

Dams of Distinction's efficiency, fertility and productivity meet the highest standards of cattle production.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*



“The secret of the cattle business is to make a female have a calf every twelve months as cheap as you can and have a profitable calf at that,” says Bob Monahan of Monahan Cattle Co., Hyannis, Neb.

The Monahan family knows a thing or two about the commercial cattle business. They make a living from their large commercial cattle operation. The Monahan Hereford herd supplies bulls for the family's commercial cow herd. Productivity and profitability are at the forefront of their selection process — from expected progeny difference (EPD) parameters to keep-or-cull decisions.

Monahan Cattle Co.'s Hereford herd is often recognized as one of the top producers of the American Hereford Association's (AHA) Dams of Distinction (DOD), an honor recognizing Hereford females that meet the most stringent ideals of commercial cattlemen.

## Finding the standouts

Efficient, fertile, productive females keep commercial and purebred cattle producers in the black year after year. But, standout females are not always easy to spot. An operation's most productive cow may not be the biggest, the most striking or overly unique to the eye, yet when the numbers are crunched, these females rise to the top.

“DOD cows subtly demonstrate consistent maternal efficiency, productivity and longevity in our herd without excessive inputs or resources. They do it in a way as not to be noticed until someone asks what cow that progeny is

out of,” says Shannon Rausch of Rausch Herefords, Hoven, S.D. — the AHA's number one DOD herd.

While they may not be easy to spot in the cow herd, according to Rausch, many qualified females share similar attributes such as being easy-fleshing, low-maintenance and high-producing cows with superior mothering ability.

After four decades in the Hereford business, Marty Lueck of Journagan Ranch/Missouri State University,

Mountain Grove, Mo., agrees. This manager of a top DOD herd says the best cows in their operation have a balance of essential traits, including fleshing ability, fertility, productivity, milking ability and growth. But, Lueck cautions single-trait selection for any of these factors can throw off the balance needed to make a profitable, productive and fertile female.

Such females and their consistency carry cow-calf operations year after year, which prompted the AHA to honor the best of the breed.

Using data submitted to the Association, AHA identifies a small percentage of females that fit the ideal cow's description year in and year out. To qualify, each cow must meet a rigorous list of requirements based upon the highest standards of commercial cattle production.

To qualify, a cow must have:

- Weaned a calf born since Jan. 1, prior to the qualifying year.
- Produced at least three calves.
- Initially calved at 30 months of age or less.
- An interval between the first and second calves of no greater than 400 days. In addition, a 370-day calving interval must have been maintained after her second calf. The longer initial calving interval allows breeders to calve 2-year-old heifers prior to the mature cow herd.
- Weaning records submitted to the AHA's Whole Herd Total Performance Records (TPR™) program for every calf produced that was born before June 30 of the qualifying year.

- A progeny average 205-day adjusted weaning weight ratio of at least 105.

Recognized Hereford cows will have “DOD” noted after their names when making an animal or EPD inquiry on *Hereford.org*. Once a cow meets the rigorous requirements to be designated as a DOD, the DOD label will appear behind her registered name for life. However, she must continue to meet these strict conditions year after year to be named in the annual DOD report.

### Power in a pedigree

DODs in a pedigree is an excellent tool for commercial and purebred cattlemen looking to add more consistency to the bottom side of their operation’s pedigrees. The recognition increases confidence for breeders and buyers alike.

Rausch and his family market several hundred head of replacement heifers and herd bulls annually. He feels the DOD designation provides a level of confidence for buyers on the future of their genetics based on past results.

“DOD cows add value to our program by producing above-average progeny every year on schedule with moderate inputs. This results in heifers to put in our replacement pen or heifers to sell to our customers for their herds. This also results in bulls to offer our customers to improve their cow herds. DOD females raise progeny to improve our herd and those of our customers’ programs,” he says.

Lueck uses DOD designations as another tool when selecting replacement females and potential herd sires. At Journagan Ranch/Missouri State University, Lueck noticed certain cow families consistently produce females who meet the requirements, and using herd bulls with DOD dams often ensures extra productivity and fertility in the pedigree. One of their herd sires has five DODs stacked in his pedigree.

“I think it stamps us that we do pay attention to our maternal traits,” he says.

### Maternal management

While heritability and balanced selection are essential factors in producing superior and productive females, poor management can hamstring the genetic potential of a cow herd. With DOD requirements weighted heavily on calving intervals, sound maternal management is a must.

The Monahans cull any cow not bred within their short 45-day breeding season, regardless of age. The Rausch family times their replacement heifer herd to be bred by artificial insemination one to two heat cycles ahead of the main cow herd, and then pasture breed the majority of cows naturally with their herd bull battery. Lueck emphasizes breeding cows as early as possible and judiciously setting breeding seasons and windows with gestation charts. Still, he says to be

mindful that time-breeding protocols often cover only 50% to 60% of females.

“It’s just good stockmanship and getting your cows bred,” he says of managing the herd.

### Bettering the breed

As Rausch summarizes, a DOD cow’s main trait is consistently performing above average on her own merit.

Females who meet this mark bring value to the breed and all cattlemen and women regardless of their end market, and Dams of Distinction should be celebrated for their contributions to Hereford genetics’ consistency. “The coveted DOD honor is truly an award that is earned,” says Shane Bedwell, AHA chief operating officer and director of breed improvement. “This program allows these matrons to be in a league of their own as they embody everything that drives maternal excellence.” **HW**

## Calving interval requirements

To be recognized as a Dam of Distinction (DOD), a cow must have a calving interval between the first and second calves of no greater than 400 days. In addition, she must maintain a 370-day calving interval after her second calf. The longer initial calving interval allows breeders to calve 2-year-old heifers prior to the mature cow herd.

American Hereford Association’s Director of Records Department Stacy Sanders shows us an example of calving interval calculation.

#### Example:

- Interval between calf 1 and calf 2: 360 days
- Interval between calf 2 and 3: 365 days
- Interval between calf 3 and 4: 385 days
- Interval between calf 4 and 5: 350 days

#### Explanation:

In this case, the cow met the initial 400-day window and is eligible for the DOD designation after producing at least three calves. A cow is allowed an extra 30 days between her first and second calves because she is still maturing. If the cow does not meet the 400-days-or-less window between her first and second calves, she will never be a DOD.

The interval between calves 2 and 3 was 365 days, coming in under the 370-day mark, making her a DOD that year. Because the permissible calving interval is different between calves 1 and 2 and 2 and 3, calculations do not average the interval between calves 1 and 2 with additional calving intervals.

The interval between calf 3 and 4 is 385. After averaging 365 and 385, her calving interval average is 375. The cow is not recognized as a DOD that year.

The interval between calf 4 and 5 is 350 days. After averaging 365, 385 and 350, her calving interval average is 366.6 days, coming in under 370 days and qualifying her as a DOD that year. **HW**