

Truth Over Trend

The beef cattle industry is at a selection crossroad.

“We are here because the truth is more important than the trend.”

That was one of many compelling statements Dr. Robert Totusek shared during the 1988 National Beef Cattle Conference: Blueprint for the Right Kind. Back then, the frame race was wide open; too-tall cattle kept getting taller and carcasses became leaner.

“In this day of much information and rapid communication, it should be much easier to arrive at valid rationale as a basis for consensus about the right kind for the industry than in the past,” Totusek said. “The next decade or two will provide a vast array of new tools as a result of the biotechnology revolution. We will be able tailor-make cattle, but we must know the right ‘kind’ to engineer. We no longer need to guess and speculate, and we cannot afford to.”

Totusek, the longtime head of the animal science department at Oklahoma State University (OSU), was widely respected for his landmark beef cattle research.

Industry next

I read proceedings from the 1988 event ahead of this May’s Cattlemen’s Conference: Blueprint for the Future; the first one since 1988. OSU hosted the conference again at Totusek Arena, the same place as that first one.

These days, industry wonderment about the right kind has more to do with genetics and what lies beneath the hide than how cattle look. Genetic trends for growth, mature cow size, carcass weight and carcass quality continue to climb. Industry concerns are increasing about things like static weaning weights and the number of calves weaned per cow exposed, reduced cattle mobility and increased late-day mortality in the cattle feeding sector.

Start at ground level

Similar topics were covered at both conferences, but there were stark

differences. For instance, an in-depth focus on soil health began this year’s conference. Speakers pointed to the importance of gathering data and understanding soil needs rather than simply taking pasture soil samples and applying fertilizer or herbicide.

OSU meat scientist, Gretchen Mafi, shared updates from the current National Beef Quality Audit, including the fact that the industry’s significant progress in carcass quality ensures consumer eating satisfaction.

Dave Lalman, OSU professor and Extension beef cattle specialist, shared the opportunity to decrease cow-calf input costs by selecting for feed efficiency. He explained the positive correlation between feed efficiency associated with a high concentrate ration and one high in roughage. The American Hereford Association and many individual breeders have collected progeny feed intake data for more than a decade to identify feed efficient genetics.

I believe Lalman’s information defines the primary questions the industry faces when it comes to determining the right kind.

Where is the point of diminishing returns for continued selection pressure on such traits as post-weaning gain and carcass quality? What genetics and breeding schemes yield the optimum result?

Lalman pointed out a 1,500-pound cow is not necessary to produce a carcass that weighs 1,050 pounds. He emphasized heterosis and crossbreeding enable commercial cow-calf producers to increase cow fertility, longevity and efficiency.

The value of conferences like this lies as much in the opportunity to exchange ideas with peers as in the formal presentations.

Here’s wishing each of you a happy and safe Fourth of July weekend as we celebrate this country’s independence and the many opportunities it provides. **HW**



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