Cattle Business in Mississippi – April 2016
"Stocker Cents" article

April showers bring plans for next year's replacements

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Although we usually associate the month of April with spring showers, mother nature had slightly different plans this year, and started with the heavy rains in early March. As cattlemen, we're always thankful for added moisture, as many still remember recent droughts. While we are currently experiencing a bit of a drought in cattle prices, we aren't experiencing a drought in heifers kept back as replacements. In fact the most recent USDA cattle inventory report (USDA-NASS, 2016) released on January 29, 2016 shows a 14% increase in beef replacement heifers in Mississippi from 97,000 to 111,000 head, and also a 4% increase in replacement heifers nationwide. With all of these extra heifers being retained, it is important that we do our best to give those heifers their best shot at being productive cows for their lifetime.

A surge in bred heifer prices (before last fall's market decline) had many producers in Mississippi and across the U.S. retaining heifers to grow their herds or market as an additional source of income. However, it is important for producers to take a hard look at a heifer before deciding if she makes the cut to be a replacement. Although, all heifers meet the number one criteria to be a replacement (actually being a heifer), not all heifers should be bred and kept as replacements in the herd.

It is important to evaluate a heifer carefully from the information available to try to predict what she will add to a cowherd, and if she will be a productive cow. Often this is difficult to do when sorting through weaned calves, and many struggle with trying to predict what type of mature cow a 500 lb heifer will be. This is even more difficult for the commercial producer evaluating his heifers without the added tools available to seedstock producers. Tools available for selecting commercial replacement heifers include the heifer's own performance data, her dam's performance and calving records, her dam's udder quality, and her sire's performance records and EPDs. When you consider these tools it adds up to quite a bit of information available. Keeping good records becomes a very important part of the selection process.

Birth date, birth weight, and weaning weight should be recorded for all potential replacement heifers. It is important to look closely at a heifer's own performance data. If a heifer is born later in the calving season, it is likely that she will reach puberty at a later age, and in turn won't have as many chances to get bred the first time, which may result in heifers calving later in the season, and ending up as open for their second calf. Her own weaning weight performance can be compared to the other heifers in her age group. If she performed below the average of the group, it would be a practice to add her to the cull list.

At birth, it is a good practice to record an udder and teat score for each cow. The Beef Improvement Federation has standardized this scoring system, and guidelines can be found http://beefimprovement.org/content/uploads/2015/08/REVISED-MasterEd-BIF-GuidelinesFinal-08-2015.pdf. Udder scores evaluate udder support and range from 9 (very tight) to 1 (very pendulous). Teat scores evaluate teat length and circumference and range from 9 (very small) to 1 (very large). Remember that udder quality is something that can be passed on, so it's likely that if her dam had a bad udder that the heifer may as well.

Finally, producers have her sire's EPDs that can be evaluated when ranking potential replacements. All breed associations provide what are commonly referred to as "maternal" EPDs that can be used to predict the performance of a bull's daughters. One example of a new useful tool for this scenario is Heifer Pregnancy EPD. It predicts the ability of a bull's daughter's to become pregnant as heifers to calve as a two year old, and is reported in units of percentage. For example, if we had two sires with daughters in the herd that are potential replacements, and bull A has a heifer pregnancy EPD of 13 and bull B has a heifer pregnancy EPD of 8, we can expect that on average bull A's daughters have a 5% greater chance of becoming pregnant as heifers. Maternal Calving Ease (MCE), and Milk are two other EPDs that are often used when evaluating a bull's daughters. Maternal calving ease is defined as the percent of unassisted births in first-calving daughters. Milk EPD is defined as the pounds of weaning weight due to milk. For all of these traits a higher number (to an extent) is more desirable. It is important to remember that with increased milk potential comes in increased nutrient requirement, so we should be cautious to not single trait select and overemphasize this one trait. Remember how much feed it takes to keep a dairy cow in peak milk production.

In closing, as you evaluate your fall calves or your spring calves this coming fall in the near future remember to be hard on those girls! Your replacement heifers represent the future of your herd, and require a good deal of investment to get them through that first calf to return on that investment. When selecting replacements from your herd, be sure to use all of the tools at your fingertips. There is a lot more information available than we often realize at first glance!

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit msucares.com/livestock/beef.