

Beef: Balance important goals

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A producer exclusively devoted to planning for the efficient critter might lose sight of overall beef demand and consumers' preference for high quality.

Stop trying to get maximum production. No more topping last year's average daily gains, enough with the peak efficiencies and quit angling for record marbling scores every time.

Does that advice cause a pause?

Reaching those goals takes years of focus, so it can be hard to let go, even if the long-term profitability of your farm or ranch depends on it.

Of course, in an ideal world, producers could maximize all of those. They could push the cattle as hard as they wanted, use all the technologies available and in the end have a superior product.

In reality, it's hard to get the most of everything there is, and it could be better to get the best of everything.

Heroic focus on one or two worthy numbers, such as yield or quality grade, can be an Achilles' heel in itself. A producer exclusively devoted to planning for the most efficient critter might lose sight of overall beef demand and consumers' preference for high quality.

On the other hand, someone who is too narrowly focused on quality grade to include profit planning might find too few pounds of beef to sell at the end of the road to pay for feed and other inputs.

The trick is to balance all important goals while trying to move the needle forward. That's not a novel concept, but everyone knows somebody — and it could be somebody in the mirror — who admits to lifting one priority or another beyond reason.

Those who are attentive to efficiency might watch numbers like average daily gain, weight per day of age and the feed-to-gain ratio. Implants and beta-agonists may be employed — the more potent the better, as long as they inch up the efficiency.

A feed-to-gain ratio in the high 4s and low 5s is impressive in production circles, but diners couldn't care less. If the efficiency came at the expense of their eating experience, it's a net loss for everyone.

On the other side of the fence might be the cattleman whose lifetime achievement goal is a load of 100 percent premium Choice and Prime steers. Implants? No way, no matter how mild; if they could have some effect on quality, he's not touching them.

A steak lover is enjoying his beef, but the feeder says it takes too many resources to pencil out.

The common ground between these producers is health and nutrition. No matter the end goal, those two things have to be in line for success. Both gain and grade will be casualties in a health wreck.

Although few producers have exclusive targets, most lean one way or another. The most profitable plan could be not aiming for the maximum in a category, but rather the optimum across the board.

Perhaps that means easing up on the growth technologies and giving up a little gain to get the grade. It could mean infusing some growth genetics into your herd, even if that includes having to hold the line on quality for a year or two.

The idea is to make sure you're considering all outcomes and looking at every relevant number, while continually looking for new relevance. That total-picture approach could lead to a well-rounded herd that addresses all the industry concerns.

Producers across the United States are proving that it's possible to have it all — quality, yield and efficiency. It just takes a 360-degree look in all directions.

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