

LIVESTOCK

Replacement cow traits affect producer success

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Many producers who reduced cow numbers in the recent drought years are considering adding females to their herds again. At current replacement

female prices, we have to do everything possible to enable the cows to cover their initial cost over time and to set them up for success.

There are general and specific criteria that should come into play when selecting cows to bring into the herd. The new cows must fit the goals, product and marketing end point, and the operation's environment. The environment is not only climate, but also soil/forage/water resources, infrastructure, personnel and management. New (and existing) cows should be expected to wean a desirable calf every 365 days, have an acceptable disposition and stay in the herd for as long as possible. Here are a few considerations I think are vital to think through as new purchases are contemplated.

- **New females should be in a stage of reproduction to calve early in or preceding your calving season.** A defined, 60- to 90-day calving season simplifies and optimizes all aspects of management, including



the health program, nutrition and marketing. It usually will reduce labor and feed costs, allow flexibility in forage management, and increase calf uniformity and value. Further, cows calving early in the calving season will wean bigger calves.

- **New females should be moderate in size, with average milk production.** Cow size and level of milk production drive the nutritional requirements of the cow. A larger, heavier milking cow needs more protein and energy throughout the year than a more moderate one.

More than anything else, proper nutrition affects her reproduction and ability to bring a calf to the weaning pen every year. The forage base provides most of the cow's nutrition throughout the year, so we need to match her size and milk to the production capability of the grass.

- **New females should be composed of a market-acceptable maternal breed or cross.** Several breeds fit this criterion, and your choice will be driven by goals and personal preference. However, if optimizing calf size and marketability is the primary objective, individual and ►

maternal heterosis should be a part of the breeding program. A single-breed cow bred to a "terminal" sire can add 5 percent to the calf's weaning weight through individual heterosis. Additionally, if the cow is crossbred, you can see an additional 5 to 6 percent increase in weaning weight due to maternal heterosis. This hybrid vigor is a "free" increase in production just by crossbreeding. There are other factors to consider in these scenarios, such as

the availability of a source of quality replacement females.

- **New females should maximize the uniformity of the cow herd.** Regardless of marketing end point of the calf crop, uniformity will always add value, and it begins with uniformity in the cows. New cows should match the breed, size and reproduction cycle of the existing herd.

These are not all the factors that should be considered before adding new cows, but I believe they

are some of the most important. I recently heard a wise old cowman say, "the cow that best fits our region is a moderate-framed, 1,100- to 1,350-pound cow with average milk production; she is late-winter- to spring-calving, in a 90-day period or less. She is made up of two maternal breeds and looks just like the rest of the cows in the herd." I'm not saying there is one cow type that fits all operations, but I doubt he is too far off in any direction. ■