

Buying a better bull

By Izak Hofmeyr

Buying a bull is one of the riskiest decisions a commercial cattle operation can make, said Dr Mario Beffa, chief executive officer of the Livestock Registering Federation (LRF), during his presentation titled “Better bull buying” at last year’s LRF Stockman School at Aldam.

“When we talk about cattle production,” he pointed out, “stud cattle are the seed stock. All the different breeds and breed combinations give the cattle producer the ability to select the best breed or combination to suit his or her production environment. Hence, buying a bull is by no means a simple process. Many crucial details should be carefully considered. The first and fundamental question to answer is what exactly is it you want to achieve? What is your breeding goal?”

Genetics and adaptability

This is not an academic question. Typically, a producer wants to make as much profit as possible within his or her production environment. In a cow-calf operation, the bull will achieve two things: It will produce female calves that will become replacement cows, and male calves will go to the feedlot.

“Fertility as a profit driver is four times more important than any other trait you can select for. It is more important to look at a bull in terms of the cows he will produce, that will be adapted and productive in your environment,” said Dr Beffa.

The cow herd represents around 67% of the livestock units in a cow-calf operation. Usually, these females are mainly reliant on the veld; hence, the cow herd must be adapted to the environment, considering the dry season and fluctuations in temperature.

In contrast, bulls typically make up some 4% of the herd but contribute

50% of the genetic material of the calf crop every year. “Over three generations, the bulls you buy will account for 88% of the genetic makeup of your cow herd. The long-term impact of your bull buying decision is immense. You will feel the impact, good or bad, of that bull in your herd for at least 15 years.”

Although adaptability is not easy to measure, Dr Beffa believes that size is a good guideline to use. “Large-framed animals are not adapted to stressful environments, so the key is to understand the optimum body size for maximum fertility and productivity. Bigger is not better.”

Selecting better bulls

There is ample useful information available when selecting the right bull for your needs. The first of these is the sales catalogue, according to Dr Beffa. However, to make the best use of this you have to learn how to interpret this information.

“There’s a wealth of information online – for example, Breedplan has a lot of information readily available. But the breeder is probably one of the most important sources of information. Phone him or her and ask about the bulls you are interested in. Find out to what extent their breeding goals match yours.” The indices and estimated breeding values (EBVs) can also be consulted. These, said Dr Beffa, are the technical specifications. “When you buy a new vehicle, you look at the technical specifications such as engine capacity, ground clearance, fuel consumption, etc. The indices



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are an indication of how profitable an individual’s progeny will be.”

Next, he said, is to look at individual EBVs of importance in your herd, for example birthweight, cow size, milk and growth. “Be aware of genetic conditions that might creep into your herd. Double muscling is a good example. Understand the prevalence of these conditions and what measures are in place to keep them in check.” Physical evaluation will always remain an essential part of bull selection.

“The technical specs allow you to narrow your search down to a few individuals. Now it is time to have a good look at the remaining candidates. The bull is essentially a genetic package, but that package needs to get the cows pregnant. He needs to be structurally sound and not break down within a year or so.

“Given the influence a bull will have on a cow herd, it is a no-brainer that time and effort should go into selecting the right bull,” he concluded. Bull buying should be regarded as a long-term investment, not an expense. **LRF**

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