

STRATEGIC CROSSBREEDING

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As a cow-calf producer, survival and operational profitability are reliant upon efficiently producing uniform calves for target markets in an economical fashion. Doing so requires a clear management plan, set goals for the cow herd, proper bull selection and a concise marketing strategy. Collectively, those things reduce risk and generate greater returns to your bottom line.

Breeding cattle isn't rocket science, although it does require common sense and a certain degree of business savvy. Simply put, there are three basic markets available: mainstream markets, lean finished markets and the premium-Choice (at least a Modest degree of marbling) markets. The majority of commercial producers shoot for the mainstream commodity market, with a handful of managers gearing enterprises towards either lean finished markets or premium-Choice markets. For the latter two markets, producers must gamble with their cattle and be comfortable absorbing greater risk into their enterprise (for example, if a particular set of calves get sick that are targeted for a natural program and must be treated with an antibiotic).

Regardless of your target market, true success starts in the cow herd and is emphasized through your bull battery. Females have to be right, regardless of breed composition. Cows must be sound-structured, big-ribbed, loose-flanked, easy-fleshing and moderate. Conservatively sized females usually will be more profitable and efficient because they often wean more total pounds of calf per cow exposed, and their calves have more market flexibility because they either can be backgrounded or go straight into the feedyard. Additionally, females should be genetically balanced – using expected progeny differences (EPDs) – if they are to be productive in the herd. Furthermore, producers realize additional value through maintaining a crossbred cow base. Production and economic advantages of commercial crossbred cows, adapted to their environment, will trump those of straightbred cows, with the following advantages:

- 20 percent more pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed and
- an additional 1.3 to 2.0 years of cow longevity.

That equates to a 30 percent increase in lifetime cow productivity.

In terms of dollars and cents, an average commercial F₁ crossbred cow has been shown to return about \$70 more per year than a straightbred. If the chosen crossbreeding system yields between half and two-thirds of maximum hybrid vigor (heterosis), the additional \$50 per cow per year yields at least \$400 more in lifetime earning over a straightbred.

With a strong cow base, managers are afforded more versatility in bull selection and, ultimately, greater access to a larger array of market opportunities. Many of the same criteria used in female selection should be applied when seeking out bulls. Potential sires should be big-

footed, good-structured, high-capacity, muscular and have above-average testicular development. Genetic composition and associated EPDs should be greater than breed average and progressive for the direction the enterprise is headed. Be sure to know and understand current breed averages for EPDs, and select bulls that will benefit the enterprise and represent the breed well.

If the mainstream market is your goal, seek to produce roughly halfblood calves. You can accomplish that by turning purebred Limousin bulls out with your English-based cows then through the use of F₁ Lim-Flex® bulls on F₁ Lim-Flex females produced. The advantage of “Lim-Flex on Lim-Flex” is that it allows producers to realize benefits of heterosis, alleviates many of the necessities required in traditional crossbreeding schemes and allows for easy retention of commercial heifers. Breeding hybrids to hybrids also affords managers a heightened degree of consistency and predictability in producing uniform calves, resulting in increased merchandising ability.

If managers aim toward lean finished markets, it would seem sensible to incorporate higher percentage Limousin genetics so the resulting calf crop is at least 75 percent Limousin influence. You can do that easily by pairing purebred Limousin bulls with halfblood or three-quarterblood Lim-Flex cows or by breeding straightbred Limousin bulls to Limousin cows.

On the other hand, if producers are geared toward premium-Choice markets, lower percentage Limousin influence is needed, with calves containing 25 percent or less Limousin. A simple approach to hitting that market would be to turn high-marbling halfblood Lim-Flex bulls in with English-based cows.

Breeding cattle to hit target markets is a blend of art and science. Contrary to what some might lead you to believe, it does not require a Ph.D. or an understanding of quantum physics. Cow-calf producers' success lies in a firm understanding of the industry, where the enterprise stands, where it needs to be and steps that must be taken to get there efficiently. As well, a strong dose of resilience and a light sense of humor help through the hard times.