

Black Ink Health Check

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Preventive health strategies: Reduce stress. Check. Use vaccines and other products designed for the “well calf.” Check. Provide good nutrition and keep facilities clean. Check, check. Select cattle for reduced sickness. Cheeee....wait a

minute. Select for health?

You may wonder what genetics has to do with herd health. Sure, the neighbor swears that cattle from this breed or that will die as soon as they get off the truck, but that’s just an old wives’ tale, right? Maybe not. Although selection for health still might be only on the horizon, a growing base of research shows they are tied together. Certain breeds and lines within breeds show a greater propensity to stay healthy.

We know it’s important to manage health. As matter of fact, it affects almost every profit driver from the obvious mortality rate (a dead critter won’t pay the bills) to feed conversion and carcass quality. It affects your reputation, too. Nobody wants to buy calves that are headed for a train wreck, and the larger the disaster, the more people tend to remember.

This is not just idle talk. You can do something, actually many things, about it by focusing on health at every stage in production, from gestation to weaning and finishing.

You may even want to start thinking about health when picking genetics. Right now, you can record sickness and then look for trends by sire or cow families. You can also look up the research that points out health benefits in certain breeds compared to others.

Health is lowly heritable, which means that you can’t make huge strides by selecting for it,

but it could be one more trait to start monitoring. And all else being equal, why wouldn’t you select for better health?

Public and private researchers alike are working to develop tools to aid in health related breeding decisions. In the next few years there probably will be DNA tests available; someday there could be expected progeny differences (EPDs) for disease resistance.

What will that mean for you?

If you’ve never retained ownership beyond weaning, it could be huge, opening doors to retaining your own, health-enhanced heifers. If you don’t know anything about the health of your calves beyond weaning, it could be your first chance to really find out and control that from an entire systems approach. Management is still the largest part of the equation, but it could help you direct the remaining variables.

Additional information tends to improve marketing. Just think of the power of proving your cattle have the genetics, not only to gain and grade, but also to stay healthy.

The return on these new tools will be even greater for those who have a stake in how the calves finish. Looking at closeouts, health can be a profit maker or breaker: good health can allow grid-marketed calves to score big; poor health can make them fail big time.

Feeders could use the DNA tests to use antibiotics more selectively and treat calves in different risk groups individually.

The possibilities are exciting – especially when you consider the estimates that show respiratory illness alone costs the industry \$750 million each year.

That seems like reason enough to add one more item on your health checklist. Δ

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