



## Foundation COMMENTARY

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**W**ith the spring comes breeding season and the decisions of which bulls will sire next year's calf crop. At this time, the mind can swirl and the options can be limitless, but a few pointers will get you going in the right direction.

Use artificial insemination (AI)! Carefully selected, proven bulls available through AI studs can move your herd ahead faster than natural service. With today's estrus-synchronization programs, AI is easier than it ever has been, with timed AI even being a feasible option for enterprises short on labor. Proven bulls take the gamble out of a breeding program and assure you of a positive genetic trend in your herd.

Judiciously mix some young sires into your AI program. Young sires are unproven so they represent somewhat of a genetic gamble. But if they do turn out, the payout can be big, and they represent the next generation of genetics. On the other hand, if they do not pan out and their expected progeny differences (EPDs) go south, you have not bet a whole calf crop on them.

Pay good money for your cleanup bulls. Even with a strong AI program, you still are likely to have a significant number of natural-service calves. Make sure what you turn out with your cows is worthy of being a herd sire. Natural-service calves do not need to be throwaways if you use a good natural-service sire. Make sure he has an EPD profile to complement your cow herd.

Think of your herd and the Limousin breed's strengths and weaknesses when designing your breeding program. On the whole, the Limousin breed must maintain (or improve) calving-ease, increase growth, continue to increase docility and fertility, and increase marbling.

The two biggest complaints we get from feeder-cattle buyers is the perception that Limousin cattle won't grade and have bad dispositions. We must address that. Our cattle with lower marbling EPDs are not adequate in that trait, and we must significantly move the breed average higher by eliminating the bottom end. As I have said in previous columns, we do not need to be a breed that grades a high percentage Choice, but we must eliminate the genetics that create Standard carcasses. If we can have Limousin grade Select reliably, we will be fine. To get this done, we need to use some higher-marbling bulls.

No breed has made greater strides than Limousin on docility, and the average Limousin is quite docile. When the

North American Limousin Foundation (NALF) introduced the industry's first docility EPD in 1995, the average Limousin born that year had a docility EPD of 4, and it has risen to greater than 16 for the average Limousin born in 2009. Still, the sire with the third most AI calves in 2009 had a docility EPD of -1 in the spring 2010 International Limousin Genetic Evaluation. Obviously, we have not totally learned our lesson. Bad-disposition cattle are detrimental to the breed, and we must not propagate them. Use the docility EPD as an important tool in your breeding program, and let's continue the positive genetic trend we have seen over the past 15 years.

Don't pigeonhole yourself into a single market. To make bull sales, the business all seedstock breeders should be in, your cattle must be attractive to the widest possible audience. Data show the average Limousin beats all other breeds on muscling, so it only makes sense to me to combine REA and marbling selection to make the cattle as versatile as possible. Even cattle with higher marbling EPDs still are not very high when considered on an across-breed basis, so they still will work fine for Laura's Lean Beef (LLB) if they are higher percentage Limousin. The partnership of LLB and Meyer Natural Angus (MNA) also holds great promise to sort carcasses in the cooler based on quality grade. Either way, it is wise to recommend to your customers to consider keeping their calves natural so they have this and Strauss Brands veal as marketing options.

Consider making some Lim-Flex hybrids. There is a market to sell bulls into highly Angus-influenced commercial herds whose managers do not want to add a full shot of Continental blood. Lim-Flex will be a definite growth area for the breed and our market share. When making Lim-Flex animals, however, do it with some of your top genetics and not from the other end, and it is important to use high-marbling Angus and Red Angus seedstock. Breed them like you would like to buy them. It is also conclusive that hybrid bulls are the fastest growing market in the beef industry, and it would be wise to consider Lim-Flex production as an option.

Breeding season is a fun time. Remember, the decisions you are making right now will largely dictate what product you have to sell two years from now. The economy should be on the mend, demand should have improved, and the Choice-Select spread should be returning to its historical seasonality. **LW**