Bull test limits genetic guesswork

Key Points

- The Abele family operates Green Springs Bull Test near Nevada.
- The test draws some 900 bull consignments from 16 states.
- The facility offers the latest residual feed intake evaluation of bulls.

By **MARK PARKER**

YOU'VE heard it before — there's good and bad in every breed of cattle. From his ranch near Nevada, Kent Abele cuts to the chase with a little more force:

"The big picture is that there are absolutely great bulls in every breed and there are absolutely terrible bulls in every breed," he says.

And he can back it up. Abele and his wife, Kathy, and son, Cole, operate Green Springs Bull Test where the performance of more than 900 bulls is measured each year. Bulls of several breeds are brought for testing from operations large and small in 16 states.

The intelligence-gathering process provides breeders with a compass to better chart genetic direction as well as delivers critical decision-making data for bull buyers.

"Beef producers are getting a lot more savvy in how they select bulls," Abele notes. "They know their investment in a bull has a tremendous impact on their profitability and don't want to just roll the dice — they want information that improves the predictability of the impact that bull will have on their calf crop and their bottom lines."

Green Springs' standard 112-day test provides basic performance and ultrasound data, but a growing number of bull consignors are also taking advantage of the facility's unique ability to measure feed efficiency by scoring residual feed intake. Excited by the possibilities RFI offers as an indicator of the genetic ability to grow and perform on less feed or forage, the Abeles worked with select customers to install GrowSafe Systems feed bunks in 2005. They became the first commercial bull test facility in the country to offer the service.

Bulls with electronic ID tags consume feed from the bunks. The technology enables Abele to identify bulls that gain as well as other bulls but do it on less feed, earning them a low, or negative, RFI score — and the attention of cost-conscious bull buyers.

"The variation in feed efficiency is pretty scary, especially with the feed costs we're dealing with today," Abele says. "We've seen differences in feed conversion from 4-to-1 to 15-to-1 and RFI swings from negative 6 to positive 11. That's a big, big difference. There's not a cattleman in the country who wouldn't want to produce calves that gain weight on less feed or gain more on the same amount of feed. Today, we can move toward that goal."

In terms of heritability, gaining more weight on a specific amount of feed is 30% to 35% heritable, which is comparable to selecting for carcass traits.

What may be even more important for Missouri cow-calf operations is that a bull's low RFI score on feed appears to translate into daughters that grow and maintain weight on less forage.

"Just think about making your cow-herd 10% more efficient," Abele says. "With 60% of variable costs in feed, we're talking about big bucks."

All bulls on test at Green Springs are fed a high-fiber, high-energy ration targeted at a daily gain of 3.5 pounds. Bulls that quality — usually 60% to 65% — are offered to beef producers through sales held the third Sunday in March and the third Sunday in November at MoKan Livestock Auction at Butler.

In addition to being screened for disposition, the selected bulls come with frame scores, pelvic and scrotal circumference measurements, and breeding soundness exam results, as well as performance and ultrasound data.

The Abeles also have a 400-cow commercial herd. When it comes time to shop for bull power, Kent switches hats and becomes a buyer at the tested bull sales he manages.

"We're in a unique situation because we get a dramatic look at the differences in bulls and we see the tremendous impact better bulls have on our own operation," he says. "There's just no doubt about it; all bulls are not created equal, and the differences can be measured."

Parker writes from Parsons, Kan.

BEEF PARTNERS: Kent and Kathy Abele started Green Springs Bull Test in 1999, carrying feed in 5-gallon buckets to 56 bulls. Today, cutting-edge technology helps them deliver decision-making data to consignors and buyers for more than 900 bulls each year.

PERFORMANCE TOOL: Green Springs Bull Test uses the GrowSafe System to measure residual feed intake on 260 bulls during a 112-day test. Bulls receive a 53-56 megacal ration, which consists of 15% hay, 15% dried distillers grains with solubles, and 62% to 66% whole corn, depending on the stage of testing.