Why Do We DNA Test Commercial Heifers?

Genomic testing improves confidence in the decisions producers make when selecting replacement heifers and bulls.

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(Casual Cattle Conversations)

Genomic testing heifers is a standard practice for many seedstock suppliers and is becoming more of a common practice for commercial cattlemen across the country. But what about this practice is drawing in more cattlemen and women?

For my husband, in-laws and I, it boiled down to having more confidence in the decisions we made when selecting replacement heifers and bulls. From there, more benefits began to present themselves.

We are approaching our third year of genomic testing our replacement heifers. The first year we tried it was a few months after Phillip and I got married and moved out to the farm. As I started falling into my role as herd manager, I realized I had no idea what we had for cows other than being predominantly Angus and Red Angus genetics.

Sure, I could look up our past weaning weights, pregnancy rates and other herd records, but selecting replacement females and bulls felt like shot in the dark, especially for someone who grew up raising seedstock cattle and always had ample information at her fingertips.

We couldn’t even set true goals for the cattle enterprise of our operation, because we had no true benchmark for where we were at. Having a benchmark is an integral component of making progress in any business. Without it, progress is either slow or non-existent.

So, after we sold steers that fall and looked at our books, I brought it up to the rest of our team, and we unanimously decided to try it out.





I was already familiar with the sampling process, having done it on my parents' operation, but if you aren't familiar, it's incredibly fast and simple to collect a tissue sample from the ear and complete the spreadsheet before mailing samples to the lab.

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When we got the results back, there were some surprises and some findings that seemed obvious knowing the history of some cows. We worked through both phenotypes and the data to ultimately select the top third of heifers to retain as breeding stock.

While there was some overlap in our sole-phenotype selections compared to using the data and phenotype, there were a few eye openers too. We found some heifers to be much more terminal than we expected.



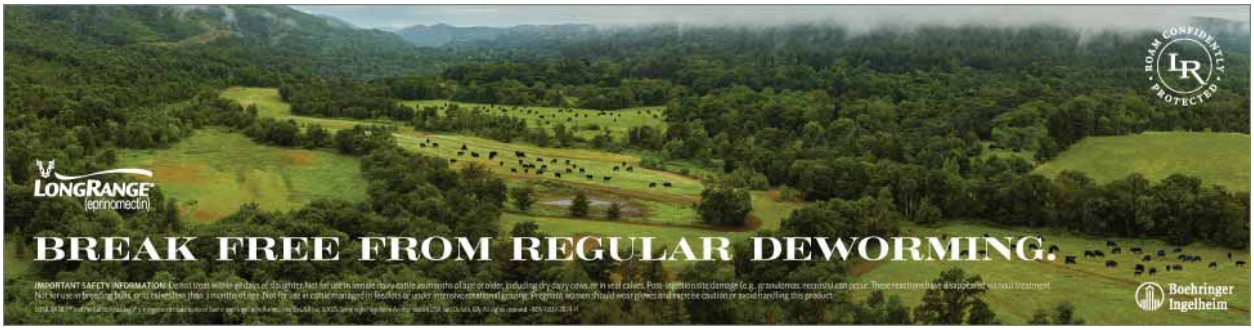




Having this benchmark of data helped all of us feel more confident in the group of replacements heifers that would be bred in the spring. And guess what? All but one of them bred up, and looking back at the data, we probably shouldn’t have kept her. This increase in stayability for our herd is the main outcome we use to measure ROI.

Once we had this information about our replacement females and the herd in general, it opened our eyes to the bulls we had been selecting. Of course, terminal traits always matter to cow-calf producers who sell through the barn, but we discovered the need to focus on a few more maternal traits.

So, come March, we were able to more confidently select bulls that better complemented the heifers and cow herd.This confidence and increased knowledge ensured we weren't spending money on the wrong bulls. We knew we were investing in the right genetics.



Outside of genetic selection, we also have an idea of the types of steers we are marketing each fall. No, we don't test our steer calves. However, the herd data from the heifers offers an idea of where our steers stand too. This information is valuable in the marketing process depending on how you sell calves.

The benefits of genomic testing have more than paid off on our operation. Yet, they pay off because we use the information to make decisions. That's the key component of seeing an ROI with any new technology. You have to be open to trusting and using the information in order to see the honest impact.