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Further Thoughts on the 2017 National Sire Test

In the February issue, there was a Performance Review from the 2017 ASA National Sire Test (NST) at the University of Illinois highlighting what we gathered from the data on the first set of Shorthorn-sired calves to go through the NST program. The first round of the NST created some positive energy among breeders who are interested in performance testing and using data in their breeding programs. With this project, a lot of data was collected that is either new to the industry or hasn't been as prevalent in the Shorthorn database. There have been some questions as to what data is the most important or should be emphasized by Shorthorn breeders. I don't think there is a single correct answer to that, but I certainly have an opinion on what I think is important to consider as a breeder, as well as the Shorthorn breed as a whole.

Feed Intake

Having the NST calves on a GrowSafe system is the cornerstone for building a data bank for feed efficiency traits. While we do have some breeder submissions into our database, the NST data is the largest and most diverse set we have been able to collect to this point. While there are several pieces and parts to feed efficiency data, I feel that feed intake measurements are an integral piece. Measuring feed intake is a direct tie to feed costs. Simply put, cattle that eat less are going to have a lower feed bill. As agricultural input costs continue to rise, identifying cattle and genetics that can perform adequately on less feed is becoming more valuable. We have been able to collect and analyze cattle's ability to gain on feed for a long time, but adding the intake piece to the puzzle gives us more opportunity to dissect the information. Figures such as Feed to Gain ratio and cost per pound of gain allow us to measure growth performance while factoring in efficiency and the economics of feeding cattle. Over the 188-day feeding trial, the average dry matter intake for all cattle was 18.6 pounds per day, with a range from 13.1 to 23.6 pounds of dry matter per day.

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Regardless of your feed costs, that's a significant difference in what it will take to feed a calf to market.

Carcass Merit

As seedstock producers, carcass traits are several steps removed from our operations at the cow/calf level. In general, I think as seedstock producers we sometimes do not emphasize carcass traits because they don't directly affect our bottom line (unless we are retaining ownership of feeder cattle). However, producing carcasses that meet industry standards does have an impact on our customers, as well as those who are buying and feeding their calves. Cattle need to meet grading standards in order to be eligible for premiums on the grid, and they need to do so with an acceptable yield to avoid discounts. The cattle in the 2017 NST were successful in meeting these benchmarks, with 85% of the cattle grading USDA Choice or better, which is right in line with the current industry standards. In terms of USDA Yield Grade, 86% of the cattle graded YG 3 or lower. These

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cattle were able to produce enough red meat product without excess fat cover. The protocol for the NST is a good representation of what cow herds are like in our nation's commercial industry, and these cattle met the marks that they needed to hit in order to produce cattle that are profitable on the rail.

Docility

I think we can all agree that docility is a trait of importance in the operation.

While labeled by many as a “convenience trait”, I believe there are more cowmen that would define it as a necessity rather than a convenience! In the 2017 NST,

docility scores (1 to 6 scale) were taken on all cattle at weaning. 74% of the cattle graded as a 1 (Very Docile) when evaluated for temperament at weaning. While docility is viewed as a trait to make cattle work easier and safer, it had an effect on performance in the NST. The average weaning weight ratio for the cattle that scored a 1 for docility was 101, while those that scored 2 or 3 averaged a 97 weaning weight ratio. The cattle with scores of 1 had higher marbling scores and better feed to gain ratios as well, requiring less feed per pound of gain. Over the 188 day feeding trail, the 1-scored cattle had an ADG 0.19 pounds per day more than their counterparts scored as 2 or 3. That's an additional 36 pounds gained.

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In our constantly evolving industry, we can't sit still in our pursuit of breeding better cattle that fit what the customer wants. In recent times, demand has developed for docile, above average carcass merit, and low-maintenance, feed efficient cattle. I don't see those traits becoming deemphasized anytime soon. In fact, I would bet that we continue to hear more about the need for cattle that fit these criteria moving forward. The breeders and breeds that make a commitment to raising these cattle will take a place at the forefront of the industry. Thanks to the NST, we have an opportunity to identify Shorthorn genetics to fill the needs and gain our position at the front of the herd. 📧