

Range Beef Cow Symposium XX

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EPDs: Strike a Balance

by Jane Messenger

FORT COLLINS, COLO. (Dec. 15, 2007)—To be successful, you have to match your cattle to your ranch environment, said Willie Altenburg, owner of Altenburg Super Baldy Ranch. Using proper genetics can help you achieve that goal.

When it comes to genetic evaluation, Altenburg said he is a strong proponent of expected progeny differences (EPDs). He told the crowd at Wednesday afternoon's session of the 2007 Range Beef Cow Symposium that he and many others in the audience are hard-core EPD number junkies who like to crunch the numbers, talk about the cattle and can't wait for the next sire summary to come out. While maybe not junkies, many other producers use the EPD numbers as a tool to breed cattle.

No matter what group you fit into, Altenburg said, "EPDs are the most important breeding tools implemented in the past century." Throughout his presentation, he provided examples of how he uses EPDs in his ranching operation.

One of the benefits of using EPDs is being able to evaluate performance data. For starters, EPDs can help you predict calving ease and birth weights. Altenburg called the calving ease EPD a better predictor of the trait than birth weight because there is more to calving ease, such as calf shape, and birth weight is already incorporated into the calving ease EPD. This becomes important when evaluating calving ease of sires to mate to first-calf heifers.

When it comes to growth traits, weaning and yearling weight EPDs are highly correlated. Altenburg said he tries to find the bulls that have offspring that calve easy and grow fast.



PHOTO BY TROY SMITH

► Willie Altenburg

Maternal traits are another important area to look at with EPDs. He concentrates mostly on maternal calving ease and milk, especially a sire's ability to affect the calving ease of his daughters. "I don't think we pay enough attention to this one," he noted.

Carcass traits are another area of concentration for Altenburg. He said he considers EPDs for ribeye, marbling and backfat. "I have found backfat to be the best indicator of cow condition," he said. This helps him select sires that are at or slightly above breed average fat. Indexing plays a role with carcass traits as well.

A couple of other EPD features that come in handy, Altenburg said, are accuracy and percentile ranking. Using bulls with high-accuracy EPDs increases the likelihood

that his progeny will on average perform as predicted. Like high school test score rankings, percentiles indicate where an individual's EPD ranks in the breed for that particular trait.

In addition to using EPDs to select for more or less of a particular trait, Altenburg suggested cattlemen establish thresholds of acceptability for use in culling decisions.

On a final note, Altenburg said he couldn't talk about EPDs without discussing the importance of also assessing animal structure. Physical traits are hard to evaluate with EPDs and are usually best evaluated by the eye of the producer, he said. Before purchasing a bull, he said he looks through the sale book to evaluate the performance, markings, EPDs and other data before arriving at the sale. Once there, he visually assesses the bull's muscle, structure and temperament, along with scouting the dam and other family members.

"I don't buy a bull without seeing his dam," he said. "EPDs are essential; physical traits are equally important. It's all about finding a balance."

The cooperative extension services and animal science departments of Colorado State University, South Dakota State University, the University of Wyoming and the University of Nebraska hosted the Range Beef Cow Symposium XX Dec. 11-13 at the Larimer County Fairgrounds and Events Complex near Fort Collins.

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Editor's Note: API coverage of the event is made available for distribution to all media via an agreement with the Range Beef Cow Symposium Committee and API. Headquartered in Saint Joseph, Mo., API publishes the Angus Journal and the Angus Beef Bulletin, as well as providing online coverage of events and topics pertinent to cattlemen.