



Breed Improvement Article

Cowboy Math (Over 3000 reasons to Ultrasound)

By Sean McGrath

It is important that seedstock producers are aware of cost/benefit of what they do to add value to their product. It is important that investments in data recording and genetic evaluation provide benefit to the downstream purchaser of the product, thus adding value to the seedstock. With that said, it is a bit of a mystery why more producers do not undertake ultrasound in their breeding programs.

To illustrate this point I have done some rough cowboy math using Can Fax' boxed beef pricing report from last week (Oct 15th). By working backwards from the boxed beef price it shows that the additional value a packer could pay in live price for cattle with a 2% increase in yield is nearly \$3 per hundredweight. While this sounds like a minimal amount, on 25 slaughter progeny weighing 1250 pounds, this is nearly \$900.

If we look at the \$11 per hundredweight price spread between AAA and AA boxed beef prices, there is further opportunity to add value to these cattle. If we took the average AA/AAA split on October 15th and increased AAA by 5% through a breeding program that targeted marbling we could potentially increase returns by nearly \$120 per head. That is with only a 5% increase in AAA grading cattle. The added value to 25 slaughter progeny is about \$2990.

In this mainstream market example, producing a bull for your commercial customer that can sire 25 slaughter progeny, increases yield by 2%, and AAA grading cattle by 5% can generate an additional \$3890. While this may vary with market conditions and the boxed beef price spread, the rewards cannot be dismissed. Even producers who sell weaned calves will have a more valuable product to potential buyers if they can get their cattle to grade.

There are other opportunities for different carcass specifications as well, with various programs paying premiums for different spec product. The important point is that knowing the carcass characteristics of your cattle and targeting your customers' cowherds can pay big dividends.

Research has consistently proven that ultrasound characteristics of young seedstock have a correlation with progeny carcass traits ranging from 0.70 to 0.80. Also consistent is the finding that ultrasound is a relatively inexpensive addition to a carcass testing program. Ultrasound allows us to rapidly obtain large quantities of records on young seedstock.

In effect this means that collecting and using ultrasound data in selection can positively impact the carcass characteristics of future progeny. In the commercial world, this is the ultimate driver of value. Processors pay for the product they can sell, feedlots selling cattle on grid payment receive added value for their efforts, turning the rewards back to producers and ultimately to seedstock providers.

One of the most effective places for breeders to invest ultrasound dollars is in scanning replacement females. By scanning yearling heifers entering the cowherd, as replacements are made and older cows culled from the breeding program the end result is a cowherd with a good carcass profile that can be mated to target any market.

The most effective way to use ultrasound data is through a genetic evaluation, where ultrasound records can be mated with performance information and anchored using actual carcass data. This is what the North American genetic evaluation does. It is important for breeders who want to maximize their opportunities to take steps ahead of time to ensure their data is of most value to them.

1. Cattle to be scanned should have performance records recorded with the CLA
2. Complete contemporary groups of cattle should be scanned
3. Cattle should be scanned between 300 – 450 days of age
4. Data must be collected through the UGC process and images must be read by an accredited technician

By taking these simple steps, breeders can obtain and use carcass and ultrasound information to best advantage. Producers who wish to scan are encouraged to contact one of the ultrasound providers below, and contact the CSA to receive their ultrasound barn sheets.

Beef Improvement Ontario
1 (519) 767-2665

Optimum Genetics
1 (306) 585-1234

Windy Ridge Ultrasound
1 (403) 752-4066

How to Scan

1. Contact a technician and schedule a scanning session (technicians are busy so book early)
2. Contact the CLA and obtain a barn sheet
3. Scan the cattle
4. Submit completed barn sheet and images to an approved laboratory (most technicians have a lab that they work with and will direct you to)
5. Reports are returned through the CLA and will contain age adjusted scan information as well as ranks/indexes on the calves