

Breeding for Performance and Resistance to Disorders

TOM LASATER
Cattleman
Matheson, Colorado

It is certainly an honor to be included in this program as one of your speakers. After attending a number of sessions here I sincerely doubt my ability to fill the bill! You have had some wonderful papers; and we have learned a lot and the humor that has gone along with it has been breathtaking! It really has been outstanding. The topic assigned to me today was "Breeding for Performance and Resistance to Disorders." What we try to do in essence is to cooperate with nature. We follow natural routes in both management and our conservation practices. Many years ago we found that nature is much smarter than all of us put together, and we try to leave as many decisions as possible to nature. We come in for the kill, so to speak. We select on results but we let nature try to figure out how to produce those results, and she has certainly done a spectacular job. All livestock should be bred, born, raised, production tested and sold under conditions in which they will be used. That should be obvious to all of us, but unfortunately the registered cattle industry in this country has not followed that in the past!

An experiment carried out in Washington State University many years ago with mice proved that you had to raise them under conditions in which they would be used. I am sure that you have all seen this in your own experiences. A classic example occurred down in south Texas where we were raised. There was a little Mexican donkey on the Mexican border. He lived on broken glass and tin cans and did very well on that diet! Now, of course, if he were moved to Kentucky, put in a race horse stable, and fed all of the oats he could eat, he would do even better! Possibly, perhaps, we have seen donkeys whose diets were changed and actually started growing when they were supposed to be matured! If you moved a Kentucky race horse down to the Mexican border it wouldn't take many meals of broken glass and tin cans and he'd be through! So it is essential that each animal be raised under the conditions in which he can be used.

In the matter of performance from a cow and calf standpoint, a good calf must be standing in the weaning pen, looking at you in June. Until that calf is actually there, of weaning age, looking you between the eyes, all else is academic! There's no use worrying about what he

might have weighed, or what he might have accomplished in his life—he had to be there first. Realizing this fact, we adopted the policy, in 1949, of requiring every female on the ranch two years old and over to have a calf standing in the pen in June, at weaning time. We “calve” in the fall and wean in June. If she does not have a representative in the weaning pen in June, she automatically puts herself in the sales pen! In other words, we prescribe this as good economics and good genetics. If you start the year with 100 head of three year olds, or older, it means that you are going to get a cash dividend for every female in the herd, two years old and over. She will either have a calf to be weaned or she will sell herself. She has to have a living calf in the weaning pen or she goes, regardless of reason. The reason for carrying it to this extreme is that if an individual calf is killed by lightning, for example, then she has a chance to rest and build her own body while her classmates are working. We don’t want any of the individuals to have an advantage over her classmates! They all have to work at the same time, rest at the same time, produce at the same time. We admit no exceptions whatsoever.

In the matter of disease resistance, the same thing holds true. All animals start out with a great deal of natural resistance, but this may be dissipated through the excessive use of vaccines, antibiotics, etc. The natural flora in the body, very often, are killed by the excessive use of drugs, and the body’s natural ability to combat infection is vastly lowered. In our herd we vaccinate all of our calves for black leg and malignant edema. The heifers are officially vaccinated for brucellosis. We would not do the latter except in selling cattle for breeding purposes, on the interstate basis it is absolutely essential; otherwise, we would only vaccinate for black leg and malignant edema.

The old-timers down in Texas had an expression, “Let them die down to a stand.” Of course, they were referring to drought and storms on the coast, but we would try to follow the same policy if we had enough cattle and thought we might live long enough to “let them die down to a stand.” In other words, let them build their own natural immunity to whatever infected them, from a disease standpoint, insect standpoint and any other standpoint—just let them figure it out for themselves!

If there are any bankers in the audience, it might be very doubtful if they would go along with this philosophy—letting them die down to a stand—but in the long run, even the bankers would be ahead! This business of saving cattle which should not be saved (through pampering them, through excessive use of drugs, etc.) in the long run costs the industry, which means the bankers, a tremendous loss!

I really think that covers most of my thoughts in one form or another. If any of you have the opportunity to visit the ranch, either while you are here on this trip, or possibly later on, we would certainly be more than happy for you to come down and see what nature has been able to do for us, and what I am sure she could do for many operators, if they would give her a chance.