

# Over The Wire

A Beef Cattle E-Letter for Area Cattle Producers

## Did You Use the Right Bull?

By: Jim Church  
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### ***What? Too Late Now!***

It's June, the cows are turned out on grass, there are hardly any feeding chores to do, all is good and there is nothing to worry about. Well, almost.

I hate to bring this up, but if you have a spring calving operation, it is breeding season and if you have any heifers to breed, you better hope you selected the right bull to breed them. If not, you will be in for an unpleasant calving season next spring where you and the vet will get to know each other on a first name basis.

### ***I Looked at His Birth Weight!***

Each year I get asked by producers, that are in the market to buy a heifer bull, if it is better to look at a bull's actual birth weight as an indicator of calving ease or look at the bull's birth weight EPD's. The answer to this question is both, but the major emphasis should be placed on the bull's birth weight EPD and more recently, calving ease direct EPD's.

For years producers have looked at the conformation and the actual birth weight of the bull they are interested in as an indicator of calving ease. Trying to determine the calving ease of a bull based on how he looks is not accurate at all. Just because he has smooth shoulders and a small head will not indicate how big his calves will be or how easy his calves come into the world.

The actual birth weight of a bull will not accurately predict the birth weight of his offspring. There are too many variables. For example, we all know a bull born to a heifer will be lighter than a bull born to a mature cow. Also, bull calves born in the summer or fall will have a lighter birth weight than bull calves born in the winter or spring.

Birth weight EPD's are much more accurate than the actual birth weight of the bull. EPD's take into account the bull's actual performance for birth, how big his calves were/are in relation to other bulls of the breed. Plus, EPD's analyze the performance of all of his relatives. If there is a relative that consistently throws big calves, it will show up in the EPD's.

The birth weight EPD is even more accurate if the bull is a proven sire. The key is to use proven calving ease bulls, of course most of us don't buy older bulls that are proven, so doing a little research on the sire, dam, grandsire and grand-dam of a bull you are interested in, will provide useful information to help in the selection.

Remember also that the dam contributes 50 percent of the genetics. Heifers that have high birth weight EPD's could be expected to have heavy calves at birth.

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## ***Are There Other Factors?***

Yes, definitely. Jane Parish, an Extension Beef Cattle Specialist at Mississippi State University, pointed out in a paper she wrote on calving ease that the Beef Improvement Federation has identified 20 factors that affect calving difficulty. These factors are:

- |                         |                          |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Age of dam           | 11. Hormonal control     |
| 2. Calf birth weight    | 12. Geographical region  |
| 3. Sex of calf          | 13. Season of year       |
| 4. Pelvic area          | 14. Environ. Temperature |
| 5. Gestation length     | 15. Nutrition of dam     |
| 6. Cow size             | 16. Condition of dam     |
| 7. Shape of calf        | 17. Implants/additives   |
| 8. Breed of sire        | 18. Feeding time         |
| 9. Breed of dam         | 19. Exercise             |
| 10. Uterine environment | 20. Other unknowns       |

## ***How About Calving Ease Direct EPD's?***

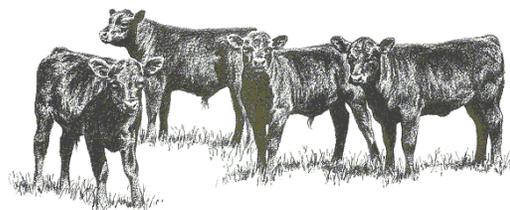
If they are available, make sure to use them. Calving Ease Direct (CED) EPD's are another great tool to help select a bull that can be used on heifers. A number of research studies have shown that calving ease direct EPD's are the most reliable way to select a bull to reduce calving difficulties.

CED provides information on the percentage of unassisted births from specific sire lines. The EPD is expressed as a percentage with a higher positive or plus figure being desirable. Birth Weight EPD's are exactly opposite, with the desirable number being lower. With CED, a higher percentage would indicate more unassisted births which is a very good thing.

Calving Ease Direct EPD's are figured using calving ease scores and actual birth weight information on calves produced by a specific sire along with information on calving ease from his relatives.

The May 2012 issue of Over The Wire, covered the topic of how to use Calving Ease Direct EPD's in great detail. You can access that issue on my website which can be found at this web address:

**<http://extension.uidaho.edu/idaho/>**



*Clip art courtesy of American Angus Association.*

Click on the Over The Wire Newsletter tab, located in the right hand column on the home page.

## ***Comparing Breeds!***

We all know certain breeds have smaller calves at birth than other breeds. When selecting heifer bulls, it may be wise to compare whatever breed you are looking at against the Angus breed. You can do this by using Across Breed EPD's adjustment factors. Angus is used as the base and they have a BW EPD of 0. The other breeds go up or down based on the average of their breed. You can then adjust the bull you are looking at to compare it to an Angus.

Don't know how to do this? The November 2010 issue of Over The Wire gave a detailed explanation on how to make across breed EPD adjustments. The E-Letter can be accessed at the same web address listed in the first column of this page. Once you click on Over The Wire Newsletter, then click on Archive of Previous Issues listed at the bottom of the page. This will take you to the Idaho Beef Newsletters webpage. At the bottom of this page, click on Over The Wire Archives and you will find the November 2010 issue.

## ***Now What?***

If the bulls have been turned in with the heifers for a month or so already, it is a little too late for this year but, you might want to look over the pedigree and EPD figures on the bulls you are using. This will give you an idea of what may be in store when February rolls around next year.

Hopefully it will make you look like a genius and won't cause you to make a run on antacids, calf pullers and obstetrical chains.

## ***Summary:***

We have come a long way with technology to help with selecting replacement bulls and heifers.

When sifting through a pen of bulls in search of a heifer bull, consider all the tools available to help make the selection successful. The available tools are:

- ◆ Birth weight EPD's.
- ◆ Calving ease direct EPD's.
- ◆ Calving ease maternal EPD's.
- ◆ Across breed EPD comparison.
- ◆ Analyze birth weight EPD data of sire, grand-sire, dam and grand-dam.
- ◆ Analyze birth weight EPD's of the heifers the bull will service.
- ◆ Actual birth weight.

Hopefully I haven't ruined your summer bringing this topic up at this time. My suggestion; don't spend too much time worrying about the heifers just yet. There will be plenty of time to do that this winter. In the meantime, like I indicated earlier in the letter, check the paperwork to see if you picked the right bull to use on the heifers. Here's to hoping that everything will be just fine.

Good luck with the upcoming haying season.



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## **References:**

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