MEASURE TWICE: CUT ONCE

Measure twice and cut once. We’ve all heard that saying. It’s often quoted when individuals get into a hurry during construction or during conversations of efficiency. I believe this concept has merit beyond the construction industry though. Every day I get phone calls from producers with issues tied to prior decisions made in the breeding process. Does that can’t deliver kids, have poor milk supply or bad mothering, have too many singles, or have a greater susceptibility to disease or parasites. Each phone call tells the painful tale of a decision made many times two or three years prior that today is causing tremendous herd or flock issues. As producers, we need to take the same approach as a carpenter: Measure twice; cut once.

In our boer goat herd we often say, “If I can remember your ear tag, it doesn’t bode well for you.” Last fall as we were sorting a group of doelings, there were a few in the group that we knew all too well. Their treatment records were complex and frustrating. They had been treated numerous times for respiratory disease alone and, interestingly enough, all of them were from the same bloodline. Others from different bloodlines, in the same group, and born at the same time, had never been ill. This bloodline seemed to have an obvious weakness, but it was supposed to be our outcross bloodline. We were left with a dilemma. Do we take a chance on them for the sake of an outcross, or cull an entire bloodline in an effort to make a hardier herd?

Measure twice: Many herd or flock issues begin with a single decision or a single animal. Perhaps the selection of a new herd sire, keeping replacements from a particular female, or even tolerating questionable health in a particular animal. In many cases these issues propagate for generations yet can take years before a problematic trait or animal becomes a mountain of a problem within the herd or flock. Back in the doeling pen a decision had to be made. From the outside looking in, the decision might have been easy, yet as we looked at two years of production, the magnitude of the decision was daunting. Would keeping the outcross bloodline be worth the risk of a disease susceptibility trait propagating? On one hand, if we kept only the best doelings, instituted new vaccines, and bred them to the right buck, perhaps the weakness could be bred out and the bloodline corrected. This option would save two years of progress in other traits and looked better for our bottomline. On the other hand, keeping them might simply suppress the issue, leaving the trait just below the surface, waiting to rise again in a couple generations when the blood was more deeply integrated into our herd. In the end, we felt we had no choice but to cull the blood. It simply wasn’t worth the risk of future problems and the future financial burden those problems would create.

Culling is the most powerful selection tool given to each producer, yet is often the one used the least. If we look to feral animals for a minute, it becomes painfully clear that unthrifty or problematic genetics don’t make it long term. On farms and ranches however, human intervention often saves those genetics to create future issues. Sometimes it can be easy to make excuses or exceptions but all producers must remember animals requiring consistent treatment or assistance are not fondly remembered on any farm. Not every illness or problem is a reason to cull however, when you see commonalities, it certainly should become a consideration. When selecting for better stock, let us all remember to measure twice, and cut once.

-Gregory Meiss

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