Composites Simplify Reproductive Management

Composite breeds like Lim-Flex provide hybrid vigor in a straightbred system

By Burt Rutherford

What's the big deal with these composite bulls, anyway? And why should I use them in my cow herd?

Those are two very valid questions, says Dr. Bob Weaber, a geneticist and head of Kansas State University's Eastern Kansas Research and Extension Centers. For the answers, he says to look at the female side of the equation.

Why? Because that's where composite bulls help commercial cow-calf producers realize the benefits of heterosis without the headaches of a more complex crossbreeding program. "Heterosis is just the little extra boost in performance we get above the average of the straightbred parents' expected performance," he says. "It's the little icing on the cake, if you will."

That icing may be more than just a little. "We get our biggest boost in performance due to heterosis in lowly heritable traits like cow longevity and fertility," he says. And given today's cost in developing replacement heifers, cow longevity is more important now than ever before.

Indeed, cow longevity and fertility are two of the most important economic traits in a commercial cow herd. Without question. That's because you can't sell a calf that's never born. And the longer a cow stays in the herd, the more her calves return economic value to the rancher.

Typical crossbreeding programs, however, can be complicated and difficult to implement, especially if you want to realize genetic improvement by retaining heifers. That's why Weaber thinks incorporating composite genetics like Lim-Flex into a breeding program is a good fit. Lim-Flex composites can have 25%- 75% Limousin genetics with the remainder being Registered Angus or Registered Red Angus.

"It's very easy to implement and they (the bulls) come with the crossbreeding system already built in," he says. "The commercial producer doesn't have to do anything extra in terms of breeding pastures or identifying replacement heifers by breed of their sire. It's as simple as straight breeding."

Composite bulls also allow cattlemen to benefit from breed complementarity when the breeds selected possess complementary traits like Limousin and Angus do. Coupled with heterosis, it adds even more to a commercial herd's economic potential. "So, producers can expect a 13 to 15 percent improvement in weaning weight per cow exposed using a Lim-Flex breeding program, for example," he says.

Real World Results

That's what commercial cow-calf producers across the country have found. Shane Whiting and his two sons run around 1000 commercial cows in northeast Utah near Roosevelt—all Lim-Flex, bulls and cows alike. His operation is testimony to how Limousin genetics have changed and improved over the years.

"Docility and calving ease are the two number-one things for a commercial rancher," he says. "And the docility of the Lim-Flex is really great. But calving ease is top of the line. She has to be able to produce a calf without a lot of problems."

Beyond that, he appreciates the longevity and fertility of his cows. "We run all our cows until they turn 12 years of age," he says, adding that they have a 60-day breeding and calving season. "And our conception rate with Lim-Flex cattle has run 95-96 percent consecutively for up to 20 years now."

That's notable because he doesn't coddle his cattle. "We're grass farmers," he says, and that's what his cattle get by on.

He also appreciates that his cows have a moderate frame size, yet they milk well. "We have better longevity and we have a better bag," he says. "These hold up."

Then there's payday. Whiting has carcass data on thousands of head beginning in 2014. That year, his calves came down the rail grading 94 percent Choice and Prime. "Now we're at 97 percent and they (the feedyard) think we have peaked out."

Looking at data from the Meat Animal Research Center, Clay Center, Nebraska, helps explain why Whiting's Lim-Flex cows perform well on a diet largely of grass and grass hay. According to the research, Limousin-sired heifers had lower feed intake (3.25 lbs./head/day) than Angus, Weaber says. The Limousin heifers also had lower body weight gain, about 0.3 lb./head/day.

"There was no statistical difference in feed efficiency yet lower intake. That's likely tied to the expected lower mature weights on these females," Weaber says. Citing other research, Weaber points out that Limousin females had the lowest mature cow weight among 10 breeds, with weights corrected for breed effect and contrasted to Angus.

Hitting Home Runs in the Southeast

Will Hargett owns a small sale barn in Ayden, North Carolina, in the eastern part of the state. “We handle quite a few cattle that are in less than load lots,” he says, with calves coming from cow herds ranging from 20 to around 100 head.

A number of years ago, he marketed some Lim-Flex calves. “We sold them to a gentleman in the western part of North Carolina who backgrounded and finished them,” Hargett says. “About a year later, he called me back and said, ‘We’ve been in the business for three generations and that last set of calves we bought out of your barn really showed us something.’”

Hargett is always on the lookout for ways to help his customers improve. He did a little research and decided he would help place some Lim-Flex bulls with area cow-calf producers.

“We’ve had a great experience with Lim-Flex bulls in recent years with what I would consider to be fairly average commercial cows, and just get outstanding calves coming off these cows,” he says. “And we’ve had a lot of good response from the people buying these calves.”

Several of his customers retain their heifers. Bred back to Lim-Flex bulls, “They’re not throwing anything with bad temperament issues. They’re easy to handle, they’re good milkers, they’re good mothers and are producing fantastic calves.”

To that end, he says the Lim-Flex genetics are busting some age-old myths. “I was very impressed with the myth-busting left over from the late 90s and early 2000s where, in this part of the country, Limousin had a reputation of being a little too framey, not very good milkers and not very good temperament in some cases,” he says.

“And it just couldn’t be any different today. They’re thick, they have great carcass quality and the females are heavy milkers. And they’re easy to handle. It’s just a totally different animal. So, it’s been quite a surprise over the years.”

Drought Insurance

“We’ve been tested pretty hard as far as weather the last handful of years,” says Shane Anderson. “Mostly drought and feeding a lot of poor-quality roughages. And they seem to be holding up.”

Anderson, a cow-calf producer from Towner, North Dakota, says that over the years he’s used Lim-Flex genetics, he sees more consistency in the conformation and disposition of the cattle. “I’ve had a lot of confidence in the Lim-Flex females as far as calving ease and the vigor of the calves when they get up and get going. They’re really a herd that doesn’t require a lot of attention in the spring. And that’s a big seller for me.”

He'll come back with Lim-Flex bulls on his replacement heifers. “I’m getting some thickness in the calves, some muscle. So, on the steer side, these percentage Lim-Flex cattle are producing

some thick-made feeder calves," he says. "I'm happy with the selection I'm finding in the Lim-Flex breed as far as bulls that hit my maternal needs as well as ones that hit the benchmark as far as the feeder calves and the performance I expect from them."

What's more, he's impressed with the longevity of Lim-Flex females. Because of ongoing drought, he culled pretty deep, but says there are still some females in his herd that are producing at 12-13 years old, "bringing in a decent calf and they're still running out with the middle-age cows. They're condition holds up well and they're still bringing a calf in."

When the time does come to rotate the old cows out of the herd, their condition and ability to yield adds value at the sale barn, he says. "I still want some salvage value and you know what? Even at 12, 13 years of age, they sell just as they would if they were five, six, seven years old. They look good."

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