The discussion of inbreeding in bull breeder circles can lead to a broad cross section of thoughts. These range from the “we must avoid inbreeding at all costs” theory, to the “linebreeding is the best thing since sliced bread” philosophy.

Inbreeding is basically the mating of animals that are related. Within the pedigree of the mated sire and dam, one or more animals will be in common; resulting in progeny with a certain level of inbreeding. The level of inbreeding will depend on the relationship between the two mated animals. The closer the relationship, the greater the level of inbreeding that will occur in the resulting progeny.

Linebreeding is the deliberate mating of closely related animals with the perceived objective to concentrate desirable characteristics of the progeny and to breed “consistency”.

The Measurement of Inbreeding

The inbreeding level in a specific animal or mating outcome can be measured by way of an inbreeding coefficient. An inbreeding coefficient is calculated as the probability percentage (%) for any allele (i.e. pair of genes at a specific location on the chromosome) to be identical by descent.

The “accuracy” of the inbreeding coefficient value that is calculated will depend on the accuracy and depth of pedigree that is recorded. For example, the accuracy of the inbreeding coefficient that is calculated would be higher in an animal with 10 generations of pedigree on both the sire and dam side, compared to an animal with 10 generations on the sire side but from a cow with little or no pedigree recorded.

Effects of Inbreeding in Beef Cattle

Inbreeding can potentially lead to three main negative outcomes being (1) inbreeding depression in production traits, (2) increased homozygosity of recessive genetic conditions, and (3) a reduction in genetic diversity.

Inbreeding depression: Generally, animals with higher levels of inbreeding have depressed performance for a range of economically important traits when compared to animals with lower levels of inbreeding (with all other factors being equal). The depression caused by inbreeding tends to negatively affect the traits which are positively affected by heterosis (i.e crossbreeding – the opposite of inbreeding). These being fertility, survival, growth, and to a lesser extent, carcase traits.

A literature review undertaken by Burrow (1993) investigated the effects of inbreeding in beef cattle. The review revealed that inbreeding of the individual has a consistent adverse effect on growth traits from birth to maturity and on maternal traits. More specifically, for every 1% increase in inbreeding coefficient a decrease of 0.06, 0.44, 0.69 and 1.30 kg in live weight at birth, weaning, yearling and maturity respectively. Additionally, inbreeding in the dam decreased weaning and yearling weights by 0.30 and 0.21 kg respectively for every 1% increase in inbreeding coefficient, probably as a result of decreasing milk yield and reduced maternal value of the inbred dams.

The review also reported inbreeding as having a depressive effect (although the magnitudes of effect were small in some cases) on heifer conception rates, female fertility, conformation/structure, feed intake, feed conversion efficiency, carcase traits and male reproductive traits.

Recessive Genetic Conditions: Most breeds have at least one recognised recessive genetic condition. An example of these is Arthrogryposis Multiplex (AM) in Angus or Angus derived cattle or Pompes Disease in Brahman or Brahman derived cattle. An animal must carry two copies (i.e. homozygote) of the recessive genetic condition to be affected by the condition. An animal that only carries one copy (heterozygote) will not show the affects, but will be a “carrier”.

An increase in inbreeding can inadvertently lead to an increase in the likelihood of animals being affected by recessive genetic
conditions. This is primarily through the increase in allele homozygosity as explained earlier.

**Reduction in Genetic Diversity:** Over time, higher levels of inbreeding will result in a loss of genetic diversity within the population. This can impact in both the potential loss of favourable alleles that may have existed for some traits, plus a decrease in the amount of genetic variation that exists between the animals on which future selection decisions can be made.

**Inbreeding Considerations**

Some breeders may argue that “structured” inbreeding programs can be used to produce a single “superior” individual through the stacking of desirable genes for certain production or functional traits (i.e. linebreeding). This is common practice in the thoroughbred horse industry. For example, Black Caviar has common ancestry in its pedigree such as a stallion called Vain. This stallion is both Black Caviar’s paternal great grandsire and maternal great-great-grandsire. He also has a second sire, Silly Season, further back in the pedigree that appears on both sides of the pedigree.

Of course, aiming to produce one superior individual will also result in many more inferior animals through inbreeding depression or appearance of recessive genetic conditions. The aim of beef cattle breeders should be to improve the average performance of the herd. This can be achieved through objective selection and allocation of matings of breeding animals on performance traits (EBVs and Indexes) in conjunction with visual appraisal, while managing inbreeding levels. This will ensure the average performance of a herd (or breed) is improved while the inbreeding level (or genetic diversity) is maintained.

**Acceptable Levels of Inbreeding**

There is no magic level that is considered an acceptable level of inbreeding within a breeding program, with the goal in most breeding programs being to manage inbreeding rather than totally avoid it. Breeding programs that simply avoid inbreeding without considering the genetic merit of the animals used within the mating program are not likely to be economically sustainable in the long term. Ultimately, the most beneficial breeding program will be the one that results in the progeny with the highest overall genetic merit once the negative effects of inbreeding have been adjusted for.

Average inbreeding coefficient levels of less than 5% within a breeding program are considered low, with inbreeding levels of 5 – 10% generally considered more moderate levels of inbreeding and warranting more careful management. However, managing the increase in inbreeding level over time is as important, if not more important than managing the overall level of inbreeding within the breeding herd.

**Tools to Manage Inbreeding**

Bull breeders have a range of tools available to assist them with genetically improving the average of their herd for production traits while monitoring and managing inbreeding. These include:

**Mating Predictor:** The online animal search facility (colloquially known as Internet Solutions) includes an “enhanced” mating predictor option which has been implemented by most breeds. This facility includes the calculation of an inbreeding coefficient, plus details on the depth of pedigree as a pseudo “accuracy” measure, for progeny from a specified mating (See Figure 1).

**Mate Allocation Tools (Such as MateSel):** A number of computer based breeding tools are available that enable breeders to optimise breeding outcomes for their herd by creating a mating list based on a list of candidate sires and dams. These provide beef cattle seedstock producers with a mechanism for objectively optimising mating allocations to reflect their breeding goals and creating long term, sustainable genetic gains. The genetic gains are based on a nominated breeding objective, while constraints are applied on inbreeding to ensure genetic diversity is maintained or improved. More information is provided regarding one such tool, MateSel, in the article on pages 1-2.

**References:**


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**Figure 1 – Example outcome from the mating predictor from a half-sib mating.**