

Less is More...

By Greg Comstock,
RAAA Marketing Programs Coordinator

...Oxymoron? Perhaps, but there is increasing evidence that commercial cow/calf operators (bull customers) are taking a more holistic approach when selecting genetic inputs. While profitability is the primary driver in producers' need to balance selection pressure across economically relevant traits, many external factors have served as catalysts for producers to rethink breeding objectives.



Helping to balance our customer's checkbook should be the first goal for the genetic inputs we supply, and that requires being able to apply selection pressure in traits where success is measured across the entire herd.

The ethanol boom, land costs, fuel costs, droughts, etc. have combined to dramatically increase feed costs for both the cow/calf and feeding sectors. Profits evaporate when decreased forage availability lowers stocking rates and increases the cost of grass per cow unit. Last fall, a formula of expensive corn being fed to high priced feeders pressured the feedlot industry to take \$20-30/ cwt off calf prices in later fall markets. Depending on their moisture, and when they sold calves, cow/calf producers were treated to at least a glimpse, and for some a ringside view, of their profitability being double-teamed by increased feed cost and decreased value of production. Sustained profitability demands that our industry's historical obsession with maximizing production traits be balanced with adroit selection for traits that are more significant to one's bottom line - even though they are both harder to measure and less fun to brag about.

"Balance" is a term that has received a lot of "lip service" in purebred cattle circles over the last decade, but it needs to refer to more than simply combining a low birth weight EPD with a big yearling weight prediction. Helping to balance our customer's checkbook should be the first goal for the genetic inputs we supply, and that requires being able to apply selection pressure in traits where success is measured across the entire herd. Granted, open cows are identified one at a time, as are calving difficulties, feet/leg/udder problems that bring an early exit from the

herd, etc. However, the cumulative effect of these individual failings shows up in conception rates, percent calf crop weaned, average replacement rate, and when viewed over time - one's ability to stay in business. Herein, is where the primary disconnect between seedstock producer and commercial customer takes place.

Our customer doesn't value the production of individual cows in their herds. That nice two-yr-old that didn't breed back always gets her head cut off in our customers' herd. One way or the other she has to leave the herd, regardless of how much heavier her calf was when compared to her contemporaries. Purebred breeders dream of hitting the "home run", the national champion, the \$100,000 bull, or perhaps a county fair winning show heifer; all of which is fine, until the application of a breeding program across the entire herd is geared towards achieving that one success. Conversely, our customers don't have any home runs to hit...their goal is to avoid striking out. The goals of their breeding programs focus on breeding away from losses and discounts. The heifer that doesn't breed, the calf born dead, the two year old that can't have her calf on her own, or doesn't breed back after calving, cows that can't maintain their body condition without supplemental feed, or calves that lack the weight or value to fit within their marketing group, all represent losses for our customers. While they can't be avoided, it's important that their

Less is More...

negative economic impact be minimized. That's why our cow/calf operators are typically more concerned with measurements that are applied across the herd, often addressing individual animal performance and genetic potential only when buying bulls. Ironically, the bulk of the seedstock industry has not provided the genetic selection tools to allow our customers to make progress at minimizing the effects of the aforementioned losses.

That is where Red Angus breaks the paradigm of typical breed associations, and remains the only breed with an extensive database of genetic predictions built through Total Herd Reporting (THR). **Like our commercial customers whose success is measured by herd-wide analysis of animal performance and production, THR requires the progeny of every registered cow to be reported on an annual basis, and the performance of every calf to be reported through weaning.** THR allows for the collection of calving ease scores and birthweights on even the dead calves, identifying the heifers that did not breed, or who needed help during calving, and discovering whose daughters leave the herd prematurely because of reproductive or structural failings. The benefits are twofold. First, the "failures" that our customers need to avoid can be identified, collected and compared across herds to identify sires whose use offers a greater probability of avoiding such failures. Second, by requiring the progeny record of every cow to be submitted - not just the performance of the calves good enough to register - more reliable genetic predictions are produced.

Through the use of THR, Red Angus has become the only breed to produce genetic selection tools which can quantify the genetic potential of yearling bulls to improve cow herd reproduction. Economically Relevant Traits of heifer fertility, calving ease, 2-yr-old heifers ability to calve unassisted, and productive lifespan are described respectively by Heifer Pregnancy (HPG), Calving Ease Direct (CED),



Another area where Red Angus separates itself from the rank and file is the ability to select for cattle that require less feed to maintain their body condition.

Calving Ease Total Maternal (CETM), and Stayability (STAY) EPDs

Another area where Red Angus separates itself from the rank and file is the ability to select for cattle that require less feed to maintain their body condition. Drought induced feed shortages and high corn prices combined to make the Red Angus Maintenance Energy Requirement EPD (ME) a primary consideration among a growing number of ranchers during the 2007 bull buying season. Keeping an eye on the ME EPD provides producers a tool to evaluate the added cost that comes with selection for higher growth and more milk. Selection for lower ME bulls should lead to daughters who can maintain body condition score with less feed, which in turn could mean cattle that sustain themselves better in tough times, or perhaps even being able to improve stocking rates.

Economic challenges often force commercial cow/calf managers to evaluate what they can afford to "take away" as opposed to what they'd like to add. Red Angus fits that economic reality by allowing selection for cattle where inputs can be taken away without affecting revenue generation. For example: take away days on feed, and still grade a high percentage choice. Take away excess mature growth, without losing pay weight or feedlot gain. Take away rainfall without losing body condition. Take away supplemental feed, and still have two-year-olds rebreed.

Certainly traits that affect weaning weight, post weaning growth and carcass composition have economic relevance. After all, producers are still paid by the pound, feed lot profits are tied to gain and grid marketing requires at least acceptable carcass performance. For the purebred breeder, all it takes to measure these are scales and an ultrasound technician. Their ease in measurement and the effectiveness of selection of EPDs have allowed the production of seedstock capable of delivering maximum growth, then maximum birth to yearling spread, then maximum marbling, and more recently, maximum rib eye area. This can lead to the production of cattle that no longer fit customers' production environments and/or marketing plans.

While it is tempting to pursue bragging rights for revenue traits it shouldn't occur at the expense or at least the neglect of other traits of equal or greater economic relevance to the success of our commercial customer. Worse yet, we run the risk of committing the seedstock industry's most oft recurring error... putting all of our efforts into making the best just a little better, rather than to put the same effort into fixing all the ones that aren't good enough. Said differently, for our customers, profits come - not so much by improving the top end - but by eliminating the losses caused by the bottom end. Red Angus provides the tools to make bulls that can do just that. ■