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Association Commentary

by Greg Comstock, RAAA Executive Secretary

Have we bred ourselves out of a job?

Remember when we could identify cows that needed a Red Angus bull simply by their color pattern?

Truth is, those flowered up Simmental cows are pretty hard to find now. Commercial roan Shorthorns are equally rare, and even the whiteface Hereford, once the omnipresent feature of America's beef industry landscape, have given way to solid color and brockle-faced British crosses. No, crossbreeding partners are not as obvious today.

In fact, there may be fewer non-Angus genetics in our industry than ever before. Many continental breeds have sustained critical mass through incorporation of Angus hybrids (i.e. SimAngus = 50% AN, 50% SM) into their registry. In some cases, 40-50% of the registered calf crop of these continental breed associations will be half Angus, and the contribution those hybrids make to that breed's commercial market share is often even higher.

This is supported by a survey of the *Western Livestock Journal's* readership. This survey of 17 western states that make up WLJ's circulation area shows that over the past four years, purchases of Continental breed bulls have decreased while the use of composite and hybrid bulls has increased significantly.

Closer study of these numbers suggests that it is the hybrid bulls that have garnered the increased demand. While the four-breed composite may offer a benefit in terms of retained heterosis, maintaining populations of such composites is a far more daunting task than the creation of hybrids. This, and the ease with which hybrids fit into crossbreeding plans get credit for the sharp rise in hybrid bulls' commercial application.

What does this have to do with Red Angus? A significant percentage of our total bull trade includes producers using Red Angus in rotational crossbreeding systems. By any count hybrid bulls have taken at least half of the commercial market share held by traditional Continental crossbreeding partners. It is in our best interest to understand the

logic driving these decisions if we want to enhance our ability to service such herds, and strengthen Red Angus' foothold in the future genetic plans for this important portion of our customer base.

The same WLJ survey shows that black Angus alone captures over 50% of the total market share, and Red Angus has moved up over the past four years to tie for second with Hereford. It is not hard for us to accept that producers turned to Red Angus to stabilize herds in terms of uniformity and color pattern after previous crossbreeding experiments. This strategy works, and I still see rainbow herds that would benefit from 2-3 generations of Red Angus bulls.

However, I think the numbers suggest that it is equally plausible that some of those same producers who used Angus/Red Angus to solve some problems, may now be looking to Angus hybrids to provide a shot of heterosis, and a little variation in additive genes. The Angus hybrid they choose could tell us if this is to fine tune the genetic component of the finished product...perhaps to reduce the incidence of YG 4's, or increase dressing percent. Maybe they want heterosis' affect on low heritability traits which impact cow herd profitability, such as fertility. This is easy for them too. Using Red Angus bulls in rotational crosses with Angus based hybrids allows the rancher to avoid large swings in biological types that can occur when Angus is crossed with purebred continentals. Multi-breed EPDs is one strategy to ensure Red Angus will easily fit into such crossbreeding plans.

We haven't bred ourselves out of a job! While there may not be as great a need to fix color pattern issues, our solid red hide (sans diluter genes) enjoys greater demand today than ever. Our job remains - to fit logically and profitably into the breeding programs of as many of this industry's cow herds as possible. The opportunity to become the crossbreeding partner of choice for these half-Angus hybrids should be seen as job security. ■