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Association Commentary

by Greg Comstock, RAAA Executive Secretary

Focus on Reproduction

This March issue of ARA Magazine highlights the many benefits available through the judicious application of AI. Artificial Insemination utilizes reproductive technology to allow genetic improvement in a desired trait(s). But, turn that statement around, and you have one of the primary reasons why cow/calf producers have chosen Red Angus to anchor their breeding programs and build their cow herds. They select Red Angus bulls to make genetic improvement in reproductive performance.

A decade ago there was tremendous selection pressure placed on "spread" bulls, which combined low birth weights with explosive growth. Since then, carcass traits have dominated much of the collective selection pressure applied by seed-stock producers across all breeds. Certainly there has been industry pressure to push selection in these areas, and while Red Angus has done a great job of delivering bulls that balance low birth with rapid early growth and superior carcass, we're much more than just a "heifer bull" breed or a high marbling breed. **Red Angus is the natural maternal foundation for commercial cow herds.**

After all, no one is going to get paid for the genetic predisposition of a steer to produce a Prime, Yield Grade 1 carcass if his dam doesn't conceive him. Yes, reproduction still trumps all.

But, what about efficiency? Certainly there is no more significant word in our industry during these days of high input costs. Like many, I can't wait for Red Angus breeders to reap the benefits from current research of phenotypic measures and DNA markers to identify variation in feed efficiency. That said - when we look at our industry holistically, efficiency is much more than just how much corn it takes to make a choice carcass. I would suggest that reproductive performance and efficiency are nearly synonymous to folks that make a living on a cow/calf operation.

The examples of cow herd efficiency expressed through reproductive measures are numerous. Fertility is probably the most obvious; and Red Angus addresses this issue in two ways. First, an EPD for Heifer Pregnancy (HPG) allows producers to place selection pressure on increased pregnancy rate among virgin heifers con-

ceiving to calve as two year olds. Next, Red Angus' Stayability EPD (STAY) provides a mean to identify which sires' daughters have a higher percentage of calving observations in subsequent years. Or, said differently, those individuals whose daughters don't breed back to calve as a three or four year old are easily found. Progress in these two traits yields plenty of efficiencies; most obvious, a higher pregnancy rate among heifers and cows means fewer replacements are needed and more can be cash cropped. Maybe less obvious, but equally relevant: higher fertility means more females bred earlier in the season; fewer days open means less feed spent on non-productive maintenance requirements; calves born earlier in the season yield greater payweights; a tighter calving season means a more uniform calf crop. Uniformity is a key determinant of value, and the quicker your cows are bred, the shorter your calving season will be, and labor can be utilized in other areas.

While we're on the subject of saving labor during calving...what about calving ease? Red Angus provides both direct calving ease (CED) and maternal calving ease (CEM); providing ranchers with reliable tools to select bulls whose calves have higher probability of being born without assistance, and whose daughters will require minimal assistance during calving. After all, conception only leads to profit if it results in a live calf. In a recent episode of The Cattle Show on RFDTV, a Red Angus bull customer stated that he had helped only two mature cows in the last 2200...that's efficiency.

This spring, as ranchers contemplate sire selection to balance traits impacting their efficiency and subsequent profitability, the balance they seek must combine calving ease, fertility and stayability. As an added bonus, the ability to produce offspring with added value traits might generate greater revenues. Of course, doing this with a lower energy requirement would really help the bottom line. Finally, doing all of the above with an agreeable disposition and a solid red hide color that offers greater adaptability over a wider range of environments would be a real plus. Fortunately, all this comes as standard equipment on the Red Angus Cow. Select sires that will make more of them. ■