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# Association Commentary

by Greg Comstock, RAAA Executive Secretary

## Building a Better Mousetrap

I've long thought it was the challenge of aiming for a constantly moving target that attracts people to breed beef cattle. Certainly it takes a "builder" mentality to devote the required energy and resources to the constant improvement of the cow herd amidst droughts, hard winters and volatile markets. Those that enjoy success in this craft also understand how unattainable perfection is. If we think about the great bulls of any breed, they all had some "holes", and they all were replaced by sons and grandsons who were deemed more balanced or better targeted for beef industry needs. To ensure our breeding goals always stay in front of us, one can count on the fact that industry trends will alter the course of selection objectives more than once over a breeder's lifetime. This obsession with fine tuning our breeding and selection practices has been as prevalent among Red Angus breeders as any, and is probably the underlying reason for the breed's continual growth in commercial utilization.

Technology has long been Red Angus' ally in our assault on improving our collective "mousetrap" and our breed and industry's dependence on it will only continue to grow. How do we know this? Just look at our past:

- We wanted "cleaner", higher quality data, so we adopted THR - a decade ahead of competitive breeds. And, we didn't stick our toe in the water with "Optional THR", we dove in with Mandatory THR.
- In order to arm our customers with information to make selection decision that would improve carcass characteristics of their calf crops; Red Angus producers started scanning yearling seedstock animals for percent IMF and Rib Eye Area.
- We were a maternal breed selling bulls to customers with only a Milk EPD, so we added genetic predictions that measured calving ease, stayability, pregnancy rate in heifers and first calf heifers' predisposition to calve unassisted.
- Foreseeing the changing cost structure of feed inputs, Red Angus adopted mature cow maintenance energy EPD. No one paid any attention to it with \$1.50/bu. corn and \$1.49/gal. diesel. Today, it is one the first traits bull buyers look for.

**As I write this column, DNA technology is about to arm our breed, and industry with another tool...**

A research team combining resources

at University of Illinois, USDA MARC, and BARC has found the location of the deletion of structural units of DNA that causes Osteopetrosis or Marble Bone as it has been observed in Red Angus cattle.

Simultaneously, a DNA test capable of determining whether an animal is a carrier or free of this genetic defect is being developed.

*Osteopetrosis is a lethal simple recessive genetic defect. Thus, calves that are homozygous (have two copies of the defective gene) are born dead. Calves that have one copy of the gene are carriers, and appear normal. Previously, carriers were only detectable through the arduous task of progeny testing to include sire:daughter matings or multiple breedings of a suspected carriers to known carriers.*

The validation of this test by the research team utilized sires from major AI studs. In addition to their greater number of genetic ties through our breed, this process offers the benefit of providing these bulls' status (Confirmed Carrier or Tested Free of the defect) prior to the breeding season. By the time you receive this magazine, these sires' status will already be listed on the Red Angus website. Soon after the research team releases this information, this technology will be transferred to commercial labs, which will make the DNA test for Osteopetrosis available to Red Angus breeders and industry stakeholders. Information on access to these tests, contact information for testing facilities, and updated lists of tested free and confirmed carriers will be maintained on the RAAA website and at the National Office.

This is a goal we have worked to achieve for over a year. Once again our breed will take a collective step towards improving the mousetrap we supply to all Red Angus stakeholders. The DNA test for Osteopetrosis comes with a learning curve, and will require breeders to invest time to understand how this tool is best utilized. However, its application is firmly nested in the Red Angus vision of providing beef industry solutions, and enhancing the competitive position of the Red Angus breed. RAAA remains committed to providing the membership and its customers access to the most current and complete information concerning genetic defects and the processes available for their management. Remember, no matter how tired we think we are of learning new tricks, if we don't embrace the use of these tools, our competitors will. ■