

Pinpointing Optimal Milk Levels

by **SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL**

“We know milking ability is a trait to be optimized — not maximized or minimized,” says Bill Bowman, American Angus Association director of performance programs. “We also know that what’s

optimal is going to vary from one operation to another based on the resources available and the cost of those resources.”

Giving commercial producers a tool to help pinpoint what’s ideal for their given

scenarios was the goal of the Angus Optimal Milk Module approved by the Association’s Board of Directors in February for launch on the Association’s Web site this spring.

The average milk expected progeny difference (EPD) in the Angus breed has increased from 6 pounds (lb.) in 1990 to 18 lb. in 2003, says Sally Northcutt, Association director of genetic research. The milk EPD does not refer to the volume of milk produced, but rather to the expected difference, expressed in pounds of calf weaned, of a sire’s daughters due to milk and mothering ability when compared to daughters of other sires.

Within the breed, milk EPDs ranged from -38 to +45 in the spring 2005 National Cattle Evaluation (NCE), Northcutt notes. “That gives commercial producers a lot of options from which to choose, but how do you know what’s best for your herd?”

Too little milk can result in underutilization of resources, fat cows and a smaller check for weaned calves. Too much milk can create problems of lower reproduction rates, higher feed costs and resource depletion.

Simple three-step process

The Angus Optimal Milk Module helps cattlemen establish a range of milk EPDs to look for when selecting herd sires that would be most desirable for their individual herds based on current herd characteristics. Available via the Internet, the interactive decision tool walks producers through a series of questions to describe their herds. Help screens available throughout the module provide insight as to the inputs and thought processes behind the module.

Step 1: Estimate average weight and general milk level of the current herd.

Step 2: Estimate average annual pasture and feed cost. If a producer doesn’t know his or her own annual cost, a help screen is available to show average costs for several areas of the country based on university and Standardized Performance Analysis (SPA) databases.

Step 3: Indicate the variability of available resources, which can affect the riskiness involved in higher-milk-EPD and larger-size cows.

With the estimates in place, the module provides a range of optimal milk EPDs to use in selecting sires for the herd, assuming the herd retains its own replacement females. At the click of a button, the module plots a graph to show the anticipated economic gain from differing sire milk EPD levels, allowing producers to see where the law of diminishing returns sets in.

The module will be available online via www.angus.org by March 12. More information will be distributed on the Angus e-List (subscribe at www.anguselist.com), on the American Angus Association Web site and through the *Angus Beef Bulletin* and the *Angus Journal*. For more information contact the Association Performance Programs Department at (816) 383-5100.