



The O'Hern family built a 960 head feeding barn to cut transportation and feed costs.

# Counting on Consistency

*Illinois commercial producer sees GeneMax™ as game changer.*

*Photos & story by*  
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*field editor*

While only in his first year of evaluating GeneMax™ (GMX) DNA technology, Illinois commercial cattle producer Larry O'Hern is excited about the prospects for his operation and for the beef industry.

"GeneMax should give us consistency, and consistency is quality," says the Vermont, Ill., producer. "Your probabilities should be 100% with genetic mapping. You eliminate the variability, and, in theory, should produce CAB® (Certified Angus Beef® brand) or better cattle."

O'Hern is part of a family livestock and grain operation with his wife, Kelley, who handles all of the financials, and son Dan. The family has about 6,000 acres, of which 1,800 are planted to row crops and 4,200 acres are grassland, timberland and hay meadows. They manage about 1,100 stock cows, turn out 2,000 yearlings per year, and have a finishing capacity of about 1,000 head.

The O'Herns have four full-time and four part-time employees as part

of the cattle operation. In addition, Larry and Kelley's three other sons work in agriculture and play advisory roles with the farm. Oldest son Patrick is a commodity portfolio manager in Boston, Tim is an attorney in St. Louis, and youngest son Matt manages a grain elevator near Adrian, Mo.

The base operation is in Illinois, but the O'Herns have cattle, land and interests in other states. That includes a satellite ranch, Heartland Ranch at Bucklin, Mo., where they keep cows and yearlings with a grazing arrangement for a large portion of the yearlings.

"We had been leasing the property and had the opportunity to buy the south portion of it a year ago," he says. "Now it gives us an opportunity to keep half our cows in that area. One thing we found in the Midwest is when corn went to \$7 and \$8, we lost a lot of grazing land. It prodded us to secure another land base in central Missouri. We feel very fortunate to have access to the grassland there to complement what we are doing in Illinois."

The O'Herns also recently partnered with good friend Butch Stevens in Rosepine, La., to found Lagniappe Farm, a purebred-Angus

cattle operation that is a satellite operation for 44 Farms. They buy the cattle from 44 Farms, and then provide breeding stock back to them.

## **Transition to vertical integration**

"Our family has always had a passion for the cattle business. I feel like we are positioned where we can participate in a lot of different aspects

of grazing and cow-calf production," says O'Hern. "We are the fifth generation here, dating back to the mid- to late-1800s."

After Larry's father passed away in 2000, the family decided to expand the Illinois business. They were backgrounding cattle at the time and sending them to western Kansas and Nebraska for finishing. To reduce

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Dan (left) and Larry O'Hern manage 1,100 stock cows, 2,000 yearlings per year and finish about 1,000 head.

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## Were you all tied up?

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transportation and feed costs, they built a 960-head feeding barn.

“We brought the finishing back home. As our operation has progressed over time, we have put a greater emphasis on the quality of our cows. When we finish our own cattle, we can capture the benefits of cheaper feed, utilize our own resources, like manure, and become more sustainable in our green footprint,” he says. “We also have better control over our marketing. We had participated with a company to sell high-quality meat into the Chicago market. It was a great learning experience, but not so good of a financial experience.”

With direct control over marketing now, O’Hern says they can guarantee a better end product. Cattle head to Tyson Foods in Joslin, Ill. A recent group of yearling cattle had an average daily gain of about 4.25 pounds (lb.) and a feed conversion of about 6.5. On 780 head of steer yearlings (six groups), daily intake was 26.45 lb. of dry matter, cost of gain was 87¢ and total cost of gain was \$1.05.

### Eliminating production variables

Having transitioned into a vertically integrated operation to better control product quality and marketing, O’Hern was willing to try GMX when his veterinarian, Allen Barclay, from Bushnell Veterinary Service, Bushnell, Ill., suggested he take a look at it.

“He does our consulting and pregnancy checks and knows our cows better than I do,” O’Hern says.

“GeneMax is a good tool for the O’Hern operation. It provides an opportunity to collect information that can help them select replacement heifers and make decisions about which bulls to use,” says Barclay. “Producers are not using this routinely here, but for select producers, GeneMax may provide additional information to guide decisions to add value to their product.”

“CAB gave us real insight into what the consumer wants and a focus on quality,” says O’Hern. “We are working hard to improve the consistency of our quality with GeneMax.”

A major priority for the family is to select specifically for quality grade.

“We feel there are premiums in CAB, and we want to capture that added value,” he says. “Walmart was selling Select, and the American consumer was happy with Select, but the game changed when Walmart went to a Choice offering. We had to rethink what we were doing. Quality always sells. We want to strive to meet the American consumer’s demand, and today that’s high-Choice.”

The O’Herns artificially inseminate (AI) about 250 heifers and use herd bulls on stock cows. Several Angus breeders are sources for herd bulls. They also use some Charolais and Simmental bulls as a

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terminal cross on older cows, but want black-hided females. Between 50 and 100 commercial bred heifers are sold annually, primarily to local producers. O’Hern buys 200-300 of the calves back every year and retains ownership.

“We are trying to eliminate as many variables and unknowns out of beef production as we can,” he says. “If we have very predictable cattle, we should in theory be able to have a barn full of 100% CAB calves. Now obviously we are realists and know that is not going to happen, but we can improve our odds if we know cattle are going to have genetic potential to do that.

“I am really excited about genetics; they are better than they were 20 years ago. As we travel through time and utilize technology, our genetics are going to get much more predictable,” he says. “We are small enough that we can manage it, but large enough to have the critical mass to vertically integrate profitably and sustainably. I think that is what makes us unique.”



**Editor’s Note:** A former National Junior Angus Association board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.

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