



ASSOCIATION LEAD IN

by **DICK SPADER**, executive director, American Angus Association

Opportunities abound for improvement

Members of the American Angus Association keep more performance records than members of any other beef breed association in the world. Last fiscal year Angus breeders reported and processed 602,507 weight records for birth, weaning and yearling. These records were reported by 5,008 members of the Association.

That's impressive, but it's tempered somewhat by the fact that 15,868 members of the Association registered cattle last year. Those performance records can be compared to the 252,929 head of Angus registered in fiscal 1998, and of that number slightly more than 70% now have birth and weaning records processed through the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) Department. Performance records are not a requirement for registration, and over the years the percentage of registered animals with performance records has grown.

Of no surprise to anyone is the fact that the Association has placed a great deal of emphasis in recent times on the importance of carcass traits and carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs). Goal No. 4 of the American Angus Association's long-range plan – have carcass EPDs on 60% of the bulls in the main Sire Evaluation Report in five years – was met this past year, well ahead of schedule.

The tools of performance for the Angus breed are available for registered and commercial cattlemen to make directional changes in the beef industry for a number of traits of economic importance, including carcass traits.

Objectives

On a broader scale, the entire beef industry knows the kind of cattle needed to increase demand for our product. The National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) completed in this decade gave us virtually all the information we needed to do battle with pork, poultry and fish. It all boils down to a few things:

1. Decrease waste fat and improve overall cutability;
2. Improve taste by improving palatability and tenderness and assuring sufficient marbling; and
3. Improve management to avoid wasteful injection-sight and hide blemishes and to reduce bruises, dark cutters and the like.

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Challenges

For years cattle producers have tried to solve their problems by changing the USDA grades, by looking to new breeds of cattle to save them, or by demanding that researchers come up with a magic wand they can wave over a beef animal to tell if it will produce the most desirable offspring.

Changing the grading system in the 1960s and 1970s only made our product less uniform and less consistent. Indiscriminate use of dozens of breeds of cattle by the commercial beef industry produced the most mongrelized cow herd in the history of U.S. beef production. While progress is being made, the fact remains that beef has lost market share in a competitive protein business.

I don't believe it is lack of knowledge, lack of tools or lack of information that keeps us from moving ahead at a faster pace in the beef industry. Rather, it is an unwillingness on the part of many U.S. cattle breeders to make the hard choices that result in beef cattle that meet today's market specifications.

We in the Angus business also have our work cut out for us. We have a long way to go to make a higher percentage of our cattle qualify for the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program and to meet all the criteria for high-quality, high-cutability finished cattle. We need more people participating in the AHIR program, and more people need to take carcass traits more seriously.

Accomplishments

We can all be proud that in most areas we, as a breed, are well ahead of our competition. Our carcass evaluation program and the carcass EPDs we have produced set us apart from all the rest. Efforts continue in this area through various departments of the Association and CAB Program such as AHIR, Commercial Relations and Supply Development.

Another big step in helping document genetics for carcass merit was made as part of the Association's long-range objective to "strive to incorporate ultrasound data into carcass EPDs by the year 2000." The American Angus Association has made a significant financial investment in the training and technology in cooperation with staff at Iowa State University as part of the American Angus Association Centralized Ultrasound Processing (AAACUP) project. Plans are to publish the first ultrasound carcass EPDs in the fall of 1999. The long-range potential is enormous as we work to develop an expanded database of carcass information for the Angus breed in an effort to help target industry end-product objectives.

Advantages

At a time in our industry when most phases have struggled for profitability, I still believe most Angus breeders have a tremendous opportunity to increase the use of Angus bulls in the commercial industry, but it means that we will need to work hard to provide the genetics that commercial producers need. Fertility, calving ease, growth, production efficiency, muscling and carcass quality are some of the major traits we need to consider and keep in balance.

At a time when lots of black, polled breeds are available, I firmly believe commercial cattlemen who want the advantages of Angus cattle will seek out highly predictable, performance-backed Angus and the registered Angus breeders who produce them.

