



THE PERFORMANCE LINK

by JOHN CROUCH, *director of performance programs, American Angus Association*

A lesson from Vidalia

A few days ago I read an article in the Wall Street Journal about Vidalia onions. Now if you're wondering why I was reading the Wall Street Journal, it just happens that this grand financial gospel arrives every day at the Association office, and, if I don't cause trouble, Rich Wilson, director of finance, let's me take it home two days a week.

Back to the article. It seems that years ago someone discovered that soil conditions around Vidalia, Ga., were conducive to growing sensationally sweet onions. After a while the idea caught on, and lots of people in that area started growing sweet Vidalia onions. Within a relatively short period of time (a quarter of a century or so), Vidalia onions were known worldwide.

As one could ascertain, and as it became more economically attractive, the geographic area where Vidalias were grown expanded considerably. Then an interesting thing happened: The area wherein those onions were grown had expanded outside the region of ideal soil conditions; hence, the quality and sweetness of Vidalia onions experienced tremendous variation.

Not to worry. A white knight in shining armor appeared and devised a method of testing the bulbs for quality and consistency. Guess what happened next. All of a sudden, onion producers realized that their onions might not pass the test for quality and consistency, and they rose up in arms because they didn't want to confuse the issue with facts. They refused to

accept improved technology to ensure a quality product.

In some ways this situation parallels the beef industry, as we have tried to sell our product without quality assurance and tried to get people to like it regardless. In this regard, new concepts in evaluating live cattle for carcass merit have arrived on the scene. The more technical concept involves validation of genetic markers through DNA sampling. A less technical concept involves the use of ultrasound technology in evaluating live animals for carcass merit.

The use of ultrasound began in the 1950s with the early scanning work by Jim Stouffer, Cornell University. Advances in hardware and software have enabled modern-day scientists to develop procedures for using ultrasound to accurately measure carcass traits such as fat thickness, ribeye area, rump fat and percent intramuscular fat or marbling.

Skeptics comfortable with traditional methods of carcass evaluation have dubbed the program as inaccurate. A look at the facts, however, reveals strong and positive correlations between ultrasound measurements and measurements taken from carcasses hanging in the packing house cooler.

Backed by these excellent research findings, the American Angus Association started accepting ultrasound data for use in carcass evaluation on Jan. 1. Far-reaching implications of this bold move are to greatly increase the database of information related to higher-

quality and more-consistent beef and beef products and additionally to characterize yearling animals and dams for these traits. As we continue to edge toward a true value-based marketing economy, these data in the form of expected progeny differences (EPDs) will be indispensable in producing a high-quality beef product.



Are you interested in becoming a Sire Evaluation Program test herd?



To learn more about how you can become involved in the Sire Evaluation Program, contact Ron Bolze (left), CAB Program director of progeny tests for carcass merit, at (785) 462-6404 or John Crouch (right), American Angus Association director of performance programs, at (816) 383-5100.