

Mother Nature, Mother Cows and Marbling



Panelists offer advice on fitting high-quality cattle to differing environments.

Story & photo by
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No farmer or rancher is immune from the challenges of nature, but some cow herds are better at adapting than others.

Paul Bennett, Red House, Va.; Brian McCulloh of Viroqua, Wis.; and Manny Encinias, Clayton, N.M., shared their stories of selecting cows to fit unique production scenarios, while also keeping the end product top of mind. They were part of an Angus University panel discussion at the Angus Convention last fall in Fort Worth, Texas.

All cattle ultimately face one consistent challenge: “The consumer’s plate,” said Justin Sexten, moderator and supply development director for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. Panelists began by naming their diverse issues, from poor forage quality to short growing seasons to lack of rain.

Complicated grass, good cattle

Fescue is Bennett’s No. 1 challenge and opportunity. Some cows thrive on it despite the toxicity, he noted. “Those cattle tend to work really well and adapt to other environments extremely well.”

They focus on cows that “slick off” quicker, as if those self-identify to stay in the herd.

“We need to let Mother Nature help us in our selection process, and I’ll contend that, as seedstock producers, it’s extremely important that we not try to manage problems out of our cattle — let our environment sort cattle for us,” he said.

Then it’s using the available data to make smart selections for customers.

“For them, if the cattle aren’t adapted to the environment, then really nothing else matters,” Bennett said. Given that, “We still have the opportunity to put a very high level of pressure on end-product merit.”

Short-season success

With 34 inches of rain in a year, Wisconsin might seem like paradise for cattlemen.



From left, Manny Encinias, Brian McCulloh and Paul Bennett agreed: No matter how their commercial customers are marketing calves, it’s part of their job as seedstock breeders to consider what will work for the whole beef community.

“Because it grows grass and grows feed, we’re going to capitalize on that,” said McCulloh. “I guess you would call our operation one that is intensively managed.”

Throw in 71 days with more than an inch of snow on the ground, along with delivering stored feed from Nov. 1 to May 1, and that paradise gets a dose of reality.

“Too often I’ve heard that you can’t have cattle that will feed and [deliver] marbling and yield grade and make good cows out of them,” he said, noting that’s just not true. He noted that his cows are in the top 50% for all but one of the traits tracked by the American Angus Association. All 385 head are in the top 20% of the breed for weaning weight, yearling weight, weaning value (\$W) and beef value (\$B).

“We can still hit the mark on weaning weight, yearling weight and marbling. I don’t think it’s mutually exclusive to select cattle that’ll kind of cover all the bases,” McCulloh said.

Piloting quality in the desert

“Most of my life, I felt sorry for myself. We lived in a desert,” Encinias said. So, for his doctoral work, he went to North Dakota. “You can grow green grass in a lot of different places, but I found out they have their own production challenges.”

When he returned to New Mexico to join his family Angus operation and start a consulting business, he “embraced” the environmental pressures. They include raising cattle in a state of varied elevations and temperature that averages 11.5 inches of rain per year and spending two-thirds of its years in drought.

“I’m a big believer we can take high-end, curve-bender genetics and make them work in our environment if we manage the little things,” he said. Those include more available trace minerals and aggressive deworming to “keep that gut as efficient as possible,” to do well on low-quality or limited water and feed. Seedstock suppliers must help

customers understand the cow’s requirements, Encinias added.

“I think we need to be able to provide customers with an owner’s manual, kind of like those with a pilot’s license. They know how to fly a Cessna, but you’re walking into a 747 jet,” he said. “By gosh, you might be able to get it off the ground, but landing may be a different monster. I think that’s a lot what we’re dealing with in New Mexico with high-performing cattle.”

The breeders agreed: No matter how their commercial customers are marketing calves, it’s part of their job to consider what will work for the whole beef community. “It’s pretty easy to continue to select for cattle with added marbling while keeping other traits in balance and perspective,” Bennett said.

Editor’s Note: *Miranda Reiman is director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC. For additional coverage of the 2017 Angus Convention, visit www.angus.org/Media/News/AngusConvention.aspx.*

