

COMMON GOALS PAY



Nick (left) and Nickey Smith depend on value-added programs like AngusLink to add dollars to their calves' sale price.

Smiths use Association programs, work with stockyard to add then capture value.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

When Nickey and Patsy Smith got married in 1971, one of Nickey's new brothers-in-law gave them a Holstein bull calf for a wedding present. The calf ended up in the freezer, but the Angus heifers Nickey bought soon after worked out, as did Patsy.

Smith hasn't stayed married for 51 years by discussing the pros and cons of his wife, but he will gladly say why he still favors Angus.

"The [American] Angus Association really tries to help the commercial cattleman," he says. "They have EPDs (expected progeny differences) and indexes, and realized pretty quick what other breeds are just now doing."

The marketability of Angus is another reason.

"Angus calves are the easiest to

market, and the Angus Association helps you market them," he says.

As a result, the females in the 300-cow operation he manages with his son, Nick, consist of at least half Angus.

The Franklinton, La., cattleman also says the American Angus Association has integrity. When dwarfism surfaced in the breed, Smith says, the Association rooted it out and fixed it.

"Nobody told them to do that," he says. "They did it on their own."

Shared focus

It is the same desire to work for their customers that convinced the Smiths to enroll in the value-added programs offered through the Association.



Left: Smith Ranches, Franklinton, La., produce beef both buyers and consumers value.

The AngusLinkSM AngusVerified claim is for cattle sired by registered Angus bulls, along with Non-Hormone Treated Cattle (NHTC) and NeverEver 3 (NE3), for cattle that have never received growth-promoting hormones, animal byproducts or antibiotics.

“I really believe we’re giving our customers what they need and want,” says Smith. “Everybody that eats a piece of beef is our customer, and our customers don’t want cattle that have had implants or antibiotics. I think that’s the way the whole food industry is going.”

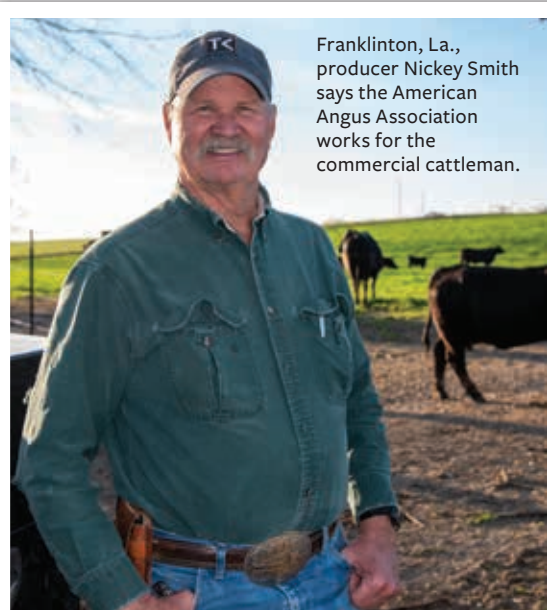
This will be the fifth calf crop Smith Ranches has marketed under AngusLink and added the NHTC/NE3 claims along with AngusVerified.

Start with the bull

They start with careful bull selection.

“I want a bull to look his part,” says Smith.

As a result, he gives potential sires the once-over for structure



Franklinton, La., producer Nickey Smith says the American Angus Association works for the commercial cattleman.

and conformation. Then he looks at data, including birth weight, weaning weight and yearling weight. Birth weight typically isn’t an issue with his cows, but since he sells by the pound, weaning and yearling weight get his attention.

Next, he says, “I look at the IMF (intramuscular fat) and dollar values [dollar value indexes (\$Values)] on carcass. I don’t usually look at the maternal numbers except on the bulls I buy to breed replacement heifers. Most of the cattle I sell are terminal.”

Adds Smith: “If you buy a bull with one or two good EPDs, you can get him kinda cheap, but when you want one with four, five or six good EPDs, they start costing you money.”

The program

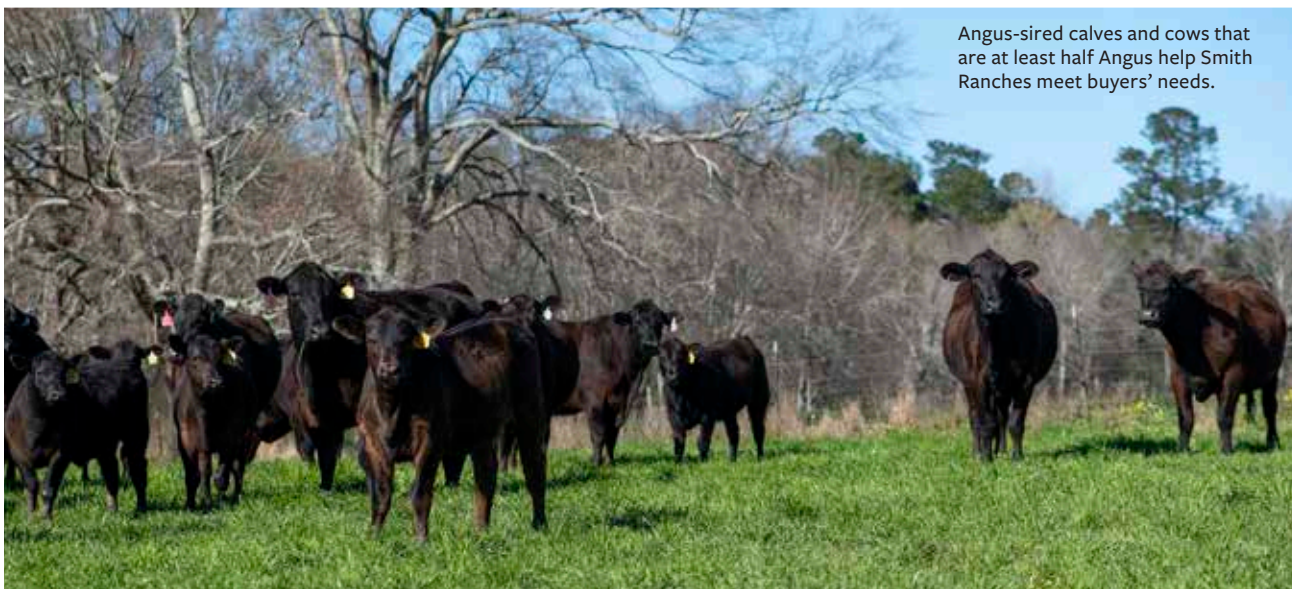
When the bull’s calves hit the ground in October and November, the Smiths make sure they express their genetic potential with a comprehensive health and nutrition program. As the bulls go out in December, the calves are vaccinated against

bacterial and viral diseases, dewormed, and bull calves are castrated. They’ll get another round of vaccinations in the spring, then again when they are weaned, along with another deworming.

Not long after their first working, the Smiths offer creep feed to calves from first-calf heifers.

“They’ll really start eating it when they’re around 3 months old,” says Smith. “We do it for two reasons: It takes a little bit of pressure off the mamas, and it gets them used to

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Angus-sired calves and cows that are at least half Angus help Smith Ranches meet buyers’ needs.

eating. Then we have very little trouble weaning.”

The calves also get the benefit of the high-quality ryegrass their mamas are grazing.

For the calves on mature cows, they’ll wait to fill the creep feeders when they are a month to six weeks out from their May-June weaning. The mixed feed from the local cooperative is the same one they use during weaning and preconditioning and is 14% protein, high-energy and high-fiber. Along with receiving 1%-1½% of their body weight in feed, the calves graze Bermuda and Bahia grass.

“We’ll put 120 pounds (lb.) on them in 60 days,” he reports.

“Some buyers actually want to see the bull papers. They want to make sure the bulls fit their criteria so the calves will perform when they get to the feedlot.” — *Jonathan Lopinto*

To market, to market

By the end of July, they’re ready to start shipping truckload lots of the carefully sorted calves, which will weigh anywhere from 700 lb. for the lightest load of heifers to 775 lb. for the heaviest load of steers.

The calves are actually sold in April or May through their local stockyard, Amite Livestock Sales Inc., in a video sale. During the

weekly sale, the auctioneer stops the regular auction and auctions off the Smiths’ cattle in truckload lots.

While the Smiths have enough cattle to sell private treaty, they depend on Jonathan

Lopinto and his staff.

“The stockyard acts as our marketing agent,” says Smith. “They stay apprised of the market and advise me on the price and when to sell.”

Lopinto makes a short video of the cattle and sends it to prospective buyers, then hands out a sheet with the cattle information on sale day.

Green energy comes at a cost

Nick Smith has trouble keeping the emotion out of his voice when he says: “All I’ve ever wanted to do my whole life is farm.”

So far, the 46-year-old has fulfilled that dream. He and his father, Nickey, graze 300 Angus-Brangus cows in Washington Parish, La. However, along with the challenges that are hitting the rest of the country’s producers, including off-the-charts price increases in fertilizer, diesel fuel, feed and almost every other input, the Smiths are losing their leased land to a solar farm.

This past April, when their yearly lease was up, the Smiths pulled 200 of their commercial cows off their 500-acre leased farm. Not only did the Bahia and ryegrass pastures provide grazing year-round, the Smiths also cut hay off the productive land.

This isn’t the first solar farm in Washington Parish. Within sight of their former leased land, 465 acres of solar panels occupy the Louisiana State University (LSU) AgCenter Southeast Experiment Station. Reportedly, that cut the dairy on the

800-acre experiment station from 300 cows to 80.

There are more solar farms on the way.

“There is a proposal for a 2,000-acre solar farm in the Northeast part of the parish,” says Washington Parish councilman Carley King.

While King opposes the solar farms, he doesn’t blame landowners for leasing their land to energy companies.

“They are offering \$800 to \$1,000 an acre per year to lease the land for 20 years,” he says. “That is life-changing money. Cattlemen are leasing the land for \$35

an acre. It is hard to say no. It is really causing some hard feelings.”

In part, the councilman opposes the solar farms because of proposed tax exemptions.

“If they are going to come, they should have to pay their taxes,” he says. “It would be different if they were creating jobs, but 500 acres of panels bring in one permanent job.”

Smith dreads seeing the ripple effect from taking farm and pasture land out of production, especially in their rural area.

“It will kill the fertilizer man, the



Nick Smith says solar panels are taking needed farmland out of production.

“They sold 14 or 15 loads when he sold ours,” Smith says. “They hustle.”

Last year, Lopinto and his team sold more than 100 loads. Buyers favor the video sales because they can buy truckload lots of calves straight off the farm, reducing the shrink and stress on the cattle.

“We’re trying to be progressive and stay in business,” Lopinto says.

The value-added programs live up to their name “if they’re done right,” Lopinto emphasizes. “I don’t see any premiums unless they go through a third-party verification.”

The premiums start at around 8¢-10¢ per pound, he estimates. “The more bells and whistles you add, the greater the premiums.”

There is another way to add dollars to the sale price, one the Smiths have down pat.

“You need quality, too,” says Lopinto. “Some buyers actually want to see the bull papers. They want to make sure the bulls fit their criteria so the calves will perform when they get to the feedlot.”

He is looking at including a value-added pen to his commingled sales. This way smaller-scale producers can participate by adding their cattle to others of like kind to make up uniform truckloads.

“The Oklahoma City sale does it and gets big premiums,” he notes.

Worth the investment

While value-added programs take

an investment in time and dollars, Smith says they pay their way.

“It costs less than \$10 a head to enroll them and for the audit. When we don’t use implants, we lose another 20 pounds per head,” he admits. “I think it is worth 15¢ to 20¢ more a pound. Even at 15¢, that’s \$100 a head. As long as they pay me for it, I’ll keep doing it.”

He adds: “You’ve got to find somebody like the Lopintos who will market them as all-natural. The calves are going to Nebraska and are fed as all-natural.”

Says the Louisiana cattleman: “It is the right thing to do.”

Editor’s note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlegirl from Cuthbert, Ga.

feed man, the herbicide man, the vet, the man that sells diesel fuel and tractor parts, the crop duster and the sale barn,” he says.

Jonathan Lopinto, co-owner of Amite Livestock Sales in neighboring Tangipahoa Parish, says: “It hasn’t affected us yet, but it will if these proposed sites go through. They’re talking about putting in a place less than a quarter mile from where I live. It will affect 10 to 12 landowners, and they all have cattle. Some of them only have 20 or 30 cows, but one landowner has a couple of hundred cows.”

It isn’t just a Louisiana challenge. According to the Cornell Small Farms Program, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory predicts there will be 3 million acres of solar farms across the United States by 2030.

While it does appear that sheep can successfully graze under solar panels, goats damage the panels. There is

At the LSU AgCenter Southeast Experiment Station, solar panels take up more than half of the station.



talk of raising the panels so cattle can graze under them, but most cattle producers wince when they think of the damage a cow can do.

The Smiths were able to find more pasture to lease, although it is 25 miles from their headquarters rather than 5 miles like the parcel going into solar panels.

However, Nick worries about the big picture. “How many acres will these solar farms take out of the food chain?”

Or, as Smith’s hashtag states, #youcanteatsolarpanels.