

MILKING IT



How to keep maternal function in line with growth goals.

by *Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

The biggest. The best. The most. More pounds at weaning is about more than bragging rights. It's about the paycheck you put in your pocket. But what if the biggest, the best, the most isn't the only path to profitability?

"There are a lot of producers I've worked with, they get really focused on outputs," says Travis Mulliniks, University of Nebraska animal scientist. "A lot of times we disregard the production costs. What did it take to wean that 6- or 700-pound (lb.) calf?"

The Angus expected progeny difference (EPD) for weaning weight has increased steadily from the 0 base in 1984 to 58 lb. last year. Along with it, milk across Angus and all other major breeds has trended upward, too.

Standardized Performance

Analysis (SPA) data from Illinois and Iowa show feed costs account for more than 50% of the variability in profit, followed by depreciation and operating costs at 17% each. Weaning weight drops toward the bottom of the list at 5%.

"So we're driving up feed cost for that 5%," he warns.

A study from Nebraska and South Dakota reinforces that. The top 35% most profitable herds in the data set had a weaning

weight 50 lb. less than those in the bottom 20%.

That's not to say a focus on growth is bad, Mulliniks says, but rather it's important to keep it in line with where the cows are located.

"Our environment really plays a big role in being able to capture that genetic potential for growth or milk," he says. In areas of limited resources, "Are we selecting for something that our cows will never, ever perform to?"

Mulliniks spent time in New Mexico, Montana and Tennessee

before coming to Nebraska. He sees milk closely related to more than just growth, no matter the location.

Data on young cows in the Southwest showed that as milk production increased, so did days returning to estrus.

"We're putting these cows at a disadvantage to be able to cycle in time to get pregnant in time," he says, noting the longevity implications. The later the cycle and pregnancy, the less chance a calf has to take advantage of that heavier-milking dam, and the lighter the calf at weaning.

"It puts her at a disadvantage the following year for getting pregnant, too," Mulliniks says.

The pregnancy rate and milk interaction can also vary by available forage quality during lactation, so a March-calving cow would have different requirements than one later in the spring. That's a consideration for any producers



looking to shift their calving season, he says.

Data, naturally

Doug and Janice Burgess tend their herds of purebred and commercial Angus cattle near Homedale, Idaho, where annual rainfall is 8-12 inches (in.) per year. Their forage resources are dictated by Mother Nature, and decades in the business have taught them not to test her.

“By August, everything’s brown, and if you get a real heavy-milking cow and she keeps trying to milk in August and September with a big calf on her ... usually it’s not good,” he says. “Eventually, if you’re honest, that will take care of itself. Sooner or later those cows will tell you there’s something not working with them.”

Janice tracks the data and makes sure her husband doesn’t get too attached to any female that plain won’t work.

“I’ve tried for 50 years to fool her, and I haven’t yet,” Doug laughs.

In order to be proactive against problems, they look for moderate milk and frame. Though they’ve always sold the commercial calves at weaning, growth and carcass traits are also part of the criteria.

“These guys with average cattle have a hard time making money feeding cattle year in and year out, but if they can get premiums, that keeps them coming back,” he says.

Recent finishing information shared back with the couple

showed 1,300- to 1,350-lb. steers went 100% Choice or better, with 34% Prime.

“That’s what they get paid on and, when you sit down for dinner, you hope it was a high-marbling calf when you order a \$25 steak,” the breeder says.

Their cattle have to travel to get to water, so feet and conformation are a must, and they won’t use a bull that’s below breed average for marbling. They also need to make long-lasting cows and a uniform set of bulls for their customers to choose from.

It’s a long list, really, and one that’s been developed over time.

That’s just the kind of “wish list” Kelli Retallick, genetic services director for Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI), likes to hear about. It’s the kind that the American Angus Association’s genetic toolbox has been designed to help producers meet.

Tailored tools

Dollar value indexes (\$Values) and EPDs allow each producer to fine-tune selection, she says.

When it comes to matching cow herd milk production to resources, Retallick says it’s important to remember, “Milk is really just the maternal component to weaning weight.

“None of our beef producers are milking their cows to see how



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— Doug Burgess

many pounds of milk they produce per day,” she says. “It’s not a true assessment of how many pounds those cows are milking per day, but rather how many pounds of weaned calf they’re adding due to their mothering ability.”

Milk EPD is included in a nonlinear fashion as part of indexes like maternal weaned calf value (\$M), which focuses on just maternal traits, and combined value (\$C), which includes both maternal and terminal traits.

“Once you get to a certain point, the amount of profit you gain for increasing milk EPD starts to flatten out,” Retallick says, so those indexes account for that.

While increasing milk EPD +10 to +20 can increase the value of \$M substantially; once animals reach that +20 to +25 milk EPD range, no substantial increase in \$M is attributed to milk EPD. An animal must have more than just milk EPD alone to rise to the top of \$M.

Additionally, cow energy value (\$EN) gives cattlemen the ability to bolster cow herd resource savings. The higher the number, the more economical subsequent females will be.

“A lot of times when I’m in conversations with breeders, specifically out West, we’re looking at things like the \$EN and

the milk EPD rather heavily. They know their environment can’t support a cow with a large maintenance cost in the high desert,” she says.

If it’s growth a producer is after, weaning weight, which is 28% heritable, or the beef dollar value (\$B) index are more precise tools to accomplish that than increasing milk, which is lowly heritable, she says. “So if you’re really focused on growth and on pounds, those traits will help you make faster genetic progress because they’re more highly heritable compared to a trait like maternal milk.”

It’s easy to make mistakes, but Doug says they try to catch and correct them as quickly as they can. Past experience, especially wisdom gained from “back in the day,” informs their decisions now.

“We were pushing for as many pounds as we possibly could ... and we finally figured out and got into a position where we could do it different and reach the same result,” he says. “Everything you read and see is ‘bigger is better,’ but I think there’s a happy medium, depending on your resources.”



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