

RESTORING BALANCE

Members, Association return focus of selection emphasis to the Angus cow.

by Shauna Hermel, editor

The Angus cow has long been the foundation of the beef industry. Before the advent of growth expected progeny differences (EPDs), before the launch of the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, she was the focal point.

Problem-free and easy-keeping, she has been known for a mothering instinct that brings a calf in every year. Her black pigmentation prevents sunburned udders and pinkeye, and the number and variety of Angus seedstock sources available means you can find Angus or Angus-cross females adapted to environments ranging from Montana to Texas and from California to New York.

The black hide of her progeny — well, it has garnered premiums for uniformity and carcass quality since the breed grazed its first Kansas pastures.

The need for growth to compete with the Continentals, fostered by the ease of measuring those traits

to generate EPDs to guide genetic selection, stole some of the focus away from the Angus cow during the last decades of the 20th Century. More recently, premiums for carcasses that hit the brand target, also fairly easy to measure via ultrasound and highly responsive to selection, have captured producer attention and pocketbooks, again stealing some of the limelight.

Giving mama some overdue attention

To balance the selection criteria and ensure the Angus cow continues her reign, Angus breeders are turning the focus back on the maternal

traits that drive herd profitability.

“We’ve made huge strides the last 40 years in growth and carcass traits by providing the selection tools needed to direct that change,” notes Mark McCully, American Angus Association CEO. “It’s a little more tricky to establish EPDs for the reproductive and convenience traits, especially with their inherent low heritability, but it’s no less important. And it’s been the emphasis of our membership and Board for quite some time to create the tools to select for maternal function and reproductive efficiency.”

The creation and expansion of the MaternalPlus® Program, a voluntary herd inventory system,

created a pathway to collect more breeding, culling and cow longevity data. Currently, 399 herds have 69,423 females enrolled in the program, reports Kelli Retallick, director of genetic services for Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI).

Members have collected data to support EPDs for heifer pregnancy, docility, foot angle and claw set. A hair shedding EPD is in the research phase, with research EPDs available on artificial insemination (AI) sires and animals in a member’s login. All of these individual traits affect cow longevity.

Making them manageable

To ease multi-trait selection for commercial herds, most of the traits were included in the maternal weaned calf value (\$M) index launched by the Association in May 2019 and are a cornerstone of the combined value (\$C) index launched this summer. Adding emphasis on maternal traits, the new indexes balance out the previous growth and carcass indexes already in the suite of dollar values (\$Values) — feedlot value

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(\$F), grid value (\$G) and beef value (\$B).

When introduced, weaned calf value (\$W) — which takes into consideration birth weight, weaning weight, maternal milk and mature cow size — was considered the maternal index, Retallick says. It was a fairly limited index, featuring the traits available at the time.

“If you pursue \$W you are pursuing growth at weaning, which is correlated to yearling,” says Whitman, Neb., cattleman and Association Board Member Jerry Connealy. Connealy, who sits on both the Breed Improvement Committee and the AGI Board, says the emphasis on growth doesn’t equate to maternal value in his area.

“As we evolved into this new era, where we have more convenience traits, those things that really affect cow profitability and things on the cow-calf side, it just made sense to include some of those traits in what I would term a truer maternal index, including all traits available that affect profitability,” Retallick notes (see “Sorting Gate” on page 34 for details on what EPDs are included in the \$M, \$B and \$C indexes). “That was really what maternal weaned calf value was designed to do.”

“The purpose of launching \$M and \$C,” Connealy says, “was to give our commercial customers the opportunity to be more profitable. We felt we had a deficit for a pure maternal index. \$M addressed those issues. We have a true maternal index with \$M.

“As far as \$C goes, we didn’t have an index that covered from birth to the kill floor, to the consumer,” he continues. “\$C covers that. It makes an easy index for somebody to jump on if he or she just wants the whole package.”

Which index is for you?

So, which \$Value should you focus on for your herd?

“\$M is designed for individuals who are retaining replacement

females within their own herd, selling the rest of their calves at weaning time,” explains Retallick.

That describes a good portion of the *Angus Beef Bulletin* audience, according to the readership survey conducted this past winter, as 88% of respondents said they raised their own replacement heifers, and 24.3% said they sell replacements. As for selling calves, 27.8% sell calves at weaning and 65.7% sell after a preconditioning period.

“Understand, though, with \$M you get no basic economic benefit from postweaning traits,” Retallick warns. Focusing on \$M alone will hold weaning weight basically steady and put a slight downward pressure on things like yearling weight and carcass weight.

“Long-term, a sole focus on \$M could affect saleability of your calves,” she says. “If a buyer takes those calves home and tries to feed them, and they don’t grow, don’t efficiently put on gain, and don’t do what they need to do for the packer, those people may not be on the seats the next time around to buy those calves.”

Retallick suggests ranking your top bulls on something like \$C, making sure they are structurally correct and fit your environment. Then pick the highest \$M bull out of those ranked on \$C.

“That allows you to make sure you have the carcass and growth traits there,” she explains, “but it places more emphasis on the cow herd than one would if only using \$B by itself.”

For herds buying their replacements or who are large enough to direct a portion of the herd for terminal production only, \$B is the most profitable index to use for sire selection.

“It’s a terminal index,” Retallick emphasizes, made for herds that will send all their calves —

whether they are males or females — to the feedyard; retain ownership; and hang them on a quality-based carcass-merit grid.

“The one thing you have to remember, though, is it has no maternal traits in it,” she warns. “If you are building a cow herd and retaining your own heifer

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“They help us aim at profitability for a particular objective.” — Kelli Retallick

replacements, you really need to make sure that you’re not forgetting about those maternal traits that could cost a cow herd money if you don’t keep track.”

\$C, the most recent index launched by the American Angus Association, is designed to hit all segments of the commercial cattle industry. It basically combines \$M and \$B into one value for the producer who retains their own replacements, but is also retaining ownership through the feedyard and selling on a quality-based grid.

It’s not quite as simple as adding the two values together, because the two values have different base units. The formula to calculate \$C is actually $\$M + (1.297 \times \$B)$.

“In a commercial setting, \$B is really where you are generating your revenue, where \$M is where you are controlling your costs,” Retallick says. “Those two things are trying to balance each other out in \$C, where we are trying to get all the horsepower out of \$B but putting the bumpers up around the traits that can cause cows to leave the herd early and increase our replacement costs.”

Indexes are valuable because they put selection pressure on multiple traits at once, says Retallick. “They help us aim at profitability.”

However, there are times a focus

on individual EPDs is important, she says. For instance, if you’ve had calving difficulty with a set of Continental-influenced cows, you may want to put a little more selection pressure on calving ease direct even though it is included in \$M and \$C.

Connealy agrees.

“We tell our customers to pay attention to the indexes, especially if they aren’t trying to fine-tune something, and \$C is a good all-encompassing index to head them down the right road,” he says. “They don’t have to maximize it, but to keep it above average if they can while still monitoring the phenotypic

traits they want to put pressure on.” There are times, however, that warrant a look at the individual EPDs, as well.

“Customers almost always have what they think is a deficit,” he explains. “Maybe they got kill data back on their last year’s set of steers, and maybe they didn’t maximize their grid opportunities because their marbling was too low.”

Connealy would encourage them to find bulls that have the indexes they like, then make sure the marbling component is high enough it will help move the needle for them. It could just as easily be birth weight or another trait where they feel like they’ve fallen behind.

“No two customers are alike,” Connealy says, pointing to the variation in goals among operations. “Having the whole suite of \$Values positions those who use registered Angus bulls to be more profitable, which ultimately makes us (seedstock suppliers) more profitable.

“Profit margins are razor thin sometimes, and it allows them to stay in business and enjoy the livelihood they chose to be in,” says Connealy. “That is our job as a Board of Directors — to position the commercial cowman to be profitable.” ■