

# COMMON GROUND

## Genetics: A key to the sustainability puzzle



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Sustainability has been a buzz term for many years now. Consumers, policymakers, and even the financial institutions that provide capital to run our businesses are asking cattlemen pointed questions about our product. While we don't love the idea of needing to prove what we do is sustainable, I have a hard time thinking these requests and demands are going to lessen in the future. I expect they'll grow exponentially.

The word "sustainability" likely prompts different reactions from cattlemen. For some, it is seen as a threat — a word hijacked by activist groups attempting to restrict how we do business or eliminate our way of life altogether. For others it is simply another word for stewardship and represents the practice of leaving things better than we found them — an idea ingrained throughout production agriculture. For others, I suspect the word represents an opportunity. It's a chance to

finally get credit for taking care of the land and cattle, supporting rural communities, and ultimately providing consumers around the world a safe, nutritious and great-tasting protein.

During the past several years, I have been part of more sustainability discussions than I care to count. It is complex for sure, and we probably have some work to do even getting a consistent definition. Still, throughout these many discussions, I find that genetics do not find themselves taking a big enough spotlight. I believe the Angus breed has an incredible story to tell, and commercial cattlemen investing in registered Angus bulls will be able to benefit from that.

A key pillar of sustainability is environmental impact. Beyond the ruminant's ability to upcycle cellulose and the importance of grasslands for wildlife and carbon sequestration, genetic gains in production efficiency made by Angus breeders are certainly something to brag about. Today's Angus genetics have been selected for increased growth rate, improved feed efficiency and improved fertility. When combined, these result in more pounds of beef produced per unit of feed and water resources used. I believe documenting this progress will be an important element of the sustainability discussion moving forward.

A second pillar of sustainability is animal care and welfare. Again, genetics play a key role. The Angus breed excels in calving ease and less dystocia, an obvious animal welfare advantage. Disposition has been a priority of the Angus breed, not to mention the benefits that come from being naturally polled and not requiring dehorning. Additionally, newer expected progeny differences (EPDs) for pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP) and hair shedding allow cattlemen to select genetics that best fit their environment.

Discussions around sustainability will include antimicrobial use. When calves come easy, get mothered up and quickly start nursing a good Angus cow with a nice udder, that all-important colostrum gets consumed. Problems at calving; slow calves; or big, hard-to-start teats compromise colostrum intake and set up a calf for more health issues, potentially requiring antibiotics, down the road.

Maybe this is new thinking about genetic progress and sustainability, but I believe these examples are a significant opportunity for us to reframe the topic.

I understand the concerns that come with more documentation and increased scrutiny of how we do what we do, but I also believe there is an incredible opportunity to reshape the narrative. We've become more sustainable by making cattle better, and nobody has done that better than the Angus breed. |

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