

# COMMON GROUND

## The great weight debate



Mark McCully, CEO  
MMcCully@angus.org

During my years at Certified Angus Beef, I frequently got into discussions with foodservice operators regarding carcass weights. They would see the historical data showing a 5- to 7-pound (lb.) annual increase and scratch their head. Questions typically started with, “Why are carcass weights going up?” They followed with, “When I pay more for smaller rib subprimals, why doesn’t it signal producers to make carcasses smaller?”

I worked through the math on many occasions. We even developed a fact sheet because the question was that popular.

It starts with the packer that has a fixed cost per shackle. As a result, a 950-lb. carcass yields a greater rate of return than an 850-lb. carcass of equivalent quality. Rails at the plants have been raised, and modifications have been made to handle the bigger carcasses of today, with plans for even bigger ones in the future.

The cattle feeder is also selling pounds, and because packer discounts typically don’t start until carcasses exceed 1,050 lb., they get the signal to make the cattle heavier. It is quite common to see finished steer weights running at 1,500 lb. today as a result.

While feed conversion worsens near the end of the finishing phase, when cost of gain is calculated on a carcass-weight basis, the value of that gain typically is more than the incremental cost. Also, Angus breeders have built genetics that can continue to grow efficiently at these heavy weights.

More pounds at weaning drives revenue for cow-calf producers. Essentially, every segment of production is incentivized to produce more pounds and make cattle heavier.

In the end, that foodservice operator hoping for smaller-weight ribs understood they can’t send a big enough premium to offset the economic efficiencies gained through making each animal weigh more. Instead, they recognized the solution to heavier weights for them comes with a knife and fabricating product differently, an effort led by the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand to achieve a more desirable portion size and thickness.

### Left to find the right balance

That leaves us with maybe the only part of the beef production system where getting bigger isn’t beneficial — the cow. The cow-calf operator is the one who has the hardest balancing act — match cow size with feed resources while maintaining reproduction and weaning more pounds. Without discipline a pursuit of increased growth results in a mature cow size that reaches beyond the optimum and is likely to show up in more open cows.

Have our nation’s cows gotten too big? That’s a highly debated topic, and I sure don’t claim to have the answer. Keeping a close eye on reproductive efficiency and lifetime productivity will give us a lot of insight. We manage cows in a lot of different environments, and I do know a one-size-fits-all approach isn’t going to work.

Never before have we had tools at our disposal to improve genetics at the pace we can today. The improvement in growth traits in Angus cattle is nothing short of amazing. Ask cattle feeders what the biggest-eating, fastest-gaining cattle in the yard are, and they’ll likely tell you Angus.

The challenge moving forward will be balancing the growth that drives so much of the economics of the beef supply chain with a cow size that fits the nutritional resources of their environment.

This is why the Association has been putting so much emphasis on Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®) Inventory Reporting and the collection of breeding records. Providing tools to help Angus breeders accomplish this balance will stay a high priority. |

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## AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION

3201 Frederick Ave., Saint Joseph, MO 64506-2997;  
phone: 816-383-5100; fax: 816-233-9703  
Office hours: (M-F) 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (Central);  
website: [www.angus.org](http://www.angus.org)

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