

Choose Wisely

Industry Insights survey digs into bull-buying data.

by Miranda Reiman, director of digital content and strategy



PHOTO BY MIRANDA REIMAN

Bull-buying preferences are often highly personal, based on cow herd makeup and marketing end goals. Sometimes there's an eclectic mix of data, tradition and relationships that find a certain sire in a specific pasture.

Lynn and Kara Goforth of Max Meadows, Va., started with the trial-and-error approach.

"In the beginning we were just kind of winging it," Lynn admits.

He and his wife, Kara, operate an Angus-based cow herd in addition to his family's southwest Virginia backgrounding operation.

"We used to just buy calving-ease bulls and hoped for a live calf, and didn't care much about the end product. Then we kind of migrated towards buying some bigger growth bulls — still didn't care much about the end product."

Then they began retaining ownership and "gridding" the progeny. That changed everything, he says.

"We realized you could have it all with a little bit more effort," Goforth says. "We didn't have to give up a trait to gain on another."

Across the country

In a survey of more than 1,300 cow-calf producers, summarized

in *Industry Insights Powered by Angus Media and CattleFax*, the *Angus Beef Bulletin* team quantified bull-buying trends among producers from across the United States.

Angus dominates the cow herd — 82% reported Angus as part of their herd's makeup — and that breed is far and away the top choice for sire selection, as well, for which 70% of the respondents select Angus.

Today, the Goforths use artificial

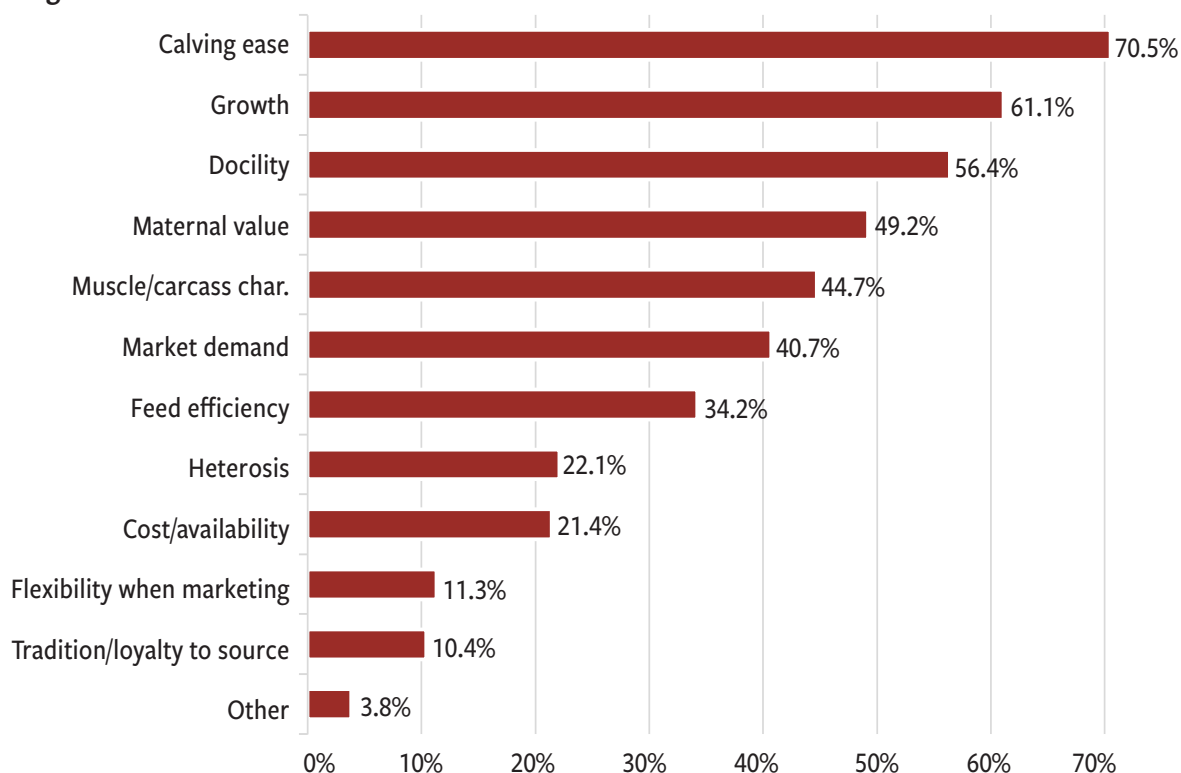
insemination (AI) on their entire cow herd before turning out Angus cleanup bulls.

"I'm a commercial guy, make no mistake about it. But Angus had way more data and predictability," Goforth says. "There were more choices in the high-accuracy bulls for what we wanted to do, and just more data. You just can't argue with that."

When asked the primary reasons for their

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Fig. 1: Reasons for bull breed choices



SOURCE: *Industry Insights Powered by Angus Media and CattleFax*, Cow-calf survey, 2023.

bull breed choice (see Fig. 1, page 116), cattlemen selected calving ease No. 1 at 70.5%, followed by growth at 61.1%, docility at 56.4% and maternal value at 49.2%. (They could select more than one option.) The lowest-ranking traits were flexibility when marketing, tradition or loyalty to source and “other.”

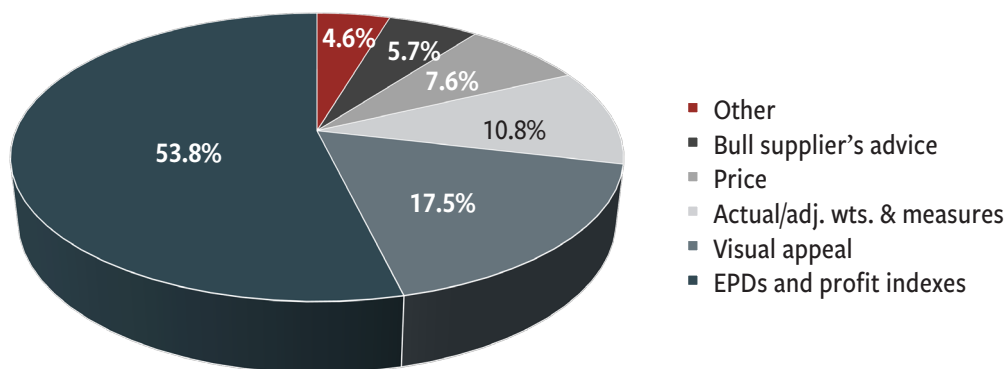
“Not surprisingly, the top four traits of importance are the ones that have the largest financial ramifications on the cow-calf producer,” the report states. “Traits of importance to downstream customers — like carcass merit and feed efficiency — are not given the same priority by the cow-calf producer.”

Seeing the value

Bo Bevis, a Northern Livestock Video Auction representative, sees that in the ranchers he works with to help market their calves.

“They’re looking for maternal characteristics and weaning and yearling weights,” he says. “But then, when it comes

Fig. 2: Which of the following influences your bull-buying the most?



SOURCE: *Industry Insights Powered by Angus Media and CattleFax, Cow-calf survey, 2023.*

to the day to market their cattle, they remember, ‘Oh, yeah, those bulls that I selected on those traits, they also have good marbling and ribeye characteristics.’”

It’s almost an afterthought in many cases, Bevis says, but he thinks that trend is changing as his customers see what calves with added-value traits like high marbling and feed efficiency are getting at auction.

“We’re at the tip of the spear on this deal.

I think they’re going to start looking at it a little harder moving forward,” he predicts.

When cattlemen are shopping for bulls, 53% say that expected progeny differences (EPDs) and profit indexes influence them the most, followed by visual appraisal at 17.5%. Just 7.6% cite price as the main criteria (see Fig. 2).

“This is a significant change in behavior

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during the past few decades. Confidence in EPDs and indexes has grown and is guiding genetic investment decisions beyond visual appraisal or actual weights,” the research notes.

An upward trajectory

There have been changes in the cattle, too. Across the survey data, producers overwhelmingly indicated that genetics have improved nearly across the board.

Carcass traits led the way for this optimism, with 84.2% indicating an improvement there; followed by 82.0% on growth and 75.6% on calving ease (see Fig. 3). More than half indicated that structure/function improved. But that category also received the most criticism, with 15.2% of respondents indicating they felt it had “declined” in the past five to 10 years.

“The members have made huge strides to make these cattle better every year,” says Levi Landers, director of field services for the American Angus Association. “They’ve listened to their customers, and they’ve made adjustments to fit their needs.”

Market reports and year-end grading data (see “Shifting Tides” on page 108) support that theory.

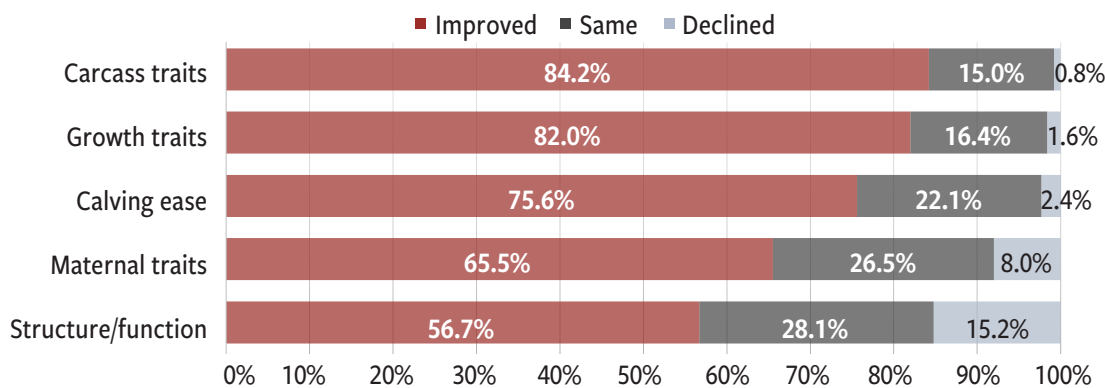
“This aligns with genetic trends across the industry, especially in the economically relevant output traits like growth and carcass, where much of the selection pressure has been focused as the industry has spent time creating an efficient, quality-based beef product for the consumer,” the paper notes.

Early carcass data reports showed Goforth that the No. 1 reason their cattle weren’t earning *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) premiums was lack of marbling.

“So, we’ve really used marbling as a threshold. We try not to use any AI or cleanup bulls that aren’t a 1 on marbling and a 1 on ribeye,” he says. “We want to meet CAB.”

Even traits like docility, which are harder to put an economic value to, are becoming important as the average ranch demographic begins to age, and finding labor continues to be

Fig. 3: Have we made improvements in last 5-10 years?



SOURCE: Industry Insights Powered by Angus Media and CattleFax, Cow-calf survey, 2023.

a challenge, Landers notes.

Power of the paper

No matter what trait a producer is selecting for, the best way to have confidence in those genetics is to make sure the bull has papers, Landers notes.

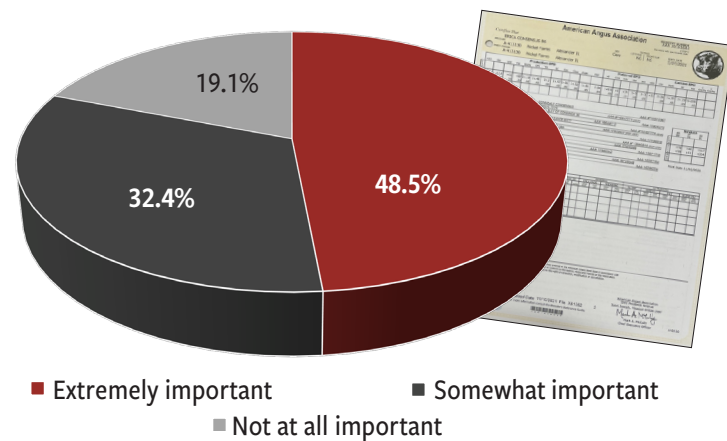
“They need to look at a seedstock provider that’s giving them the data that they need to move their program forward,” he says.

Among survey respondents, 81% say it is important that they buy registered bulls (see Fig. 4). Nearly half classified it as “extremely important” and another 32% said it was “somewhat important.”

In the era of feeder-calf marketing programs, Landers sees that growing.

“With the premiums being paid for Angus-verified calves through AngusLinkSM, that dollar amount can’t be ignored,” Landers said. “Certified Angus Beef and AngusLink

Fig. 4: How important is it that the bulls you buy be registered?



SOURCE: Industry Insights Powered by Angus Media and CattleFax, Cow-calf survey, 2023.

provide the tools necessary for the packers and feeders to make the most viable buying decisions out there. That and the premiums that CAB offers are a driving force and why Angus has been so accepted over the years.”

The most frequently asked question Bevis gets in his role is: What can I do to make my calves worth more money?

A quicker fix is to go for growth and pounds, he says. “However, if I wanted to make a transition that isn’t as quick, I’d promote marbling.”

That’s a game of patience, Bevis explains, as a buyer has to get a set or two of harvest data before it shows up in the value. Reputation is still worth a lot.

“It’s a pretty small world out there,” Bevis emphasizes.

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