



Sharing Inside Intel

44 Farms delivers data to producers, wins BIF honors.

by *Miranda Reiman*

12

For years, when Blair and Susan Hart, commercial producers in northern California, tried to get more information back on their calves, the answer was usually the same.

“When we first started this whole deal, no one wanted to share the data,” Susan recalls. “It’s almost like the feedlots didn’t want to give you the data, because if your calves were good, they didn’t want you to know.”

To the family whose whole program centered around producing the best with the resources they’re given, that wasn’t the answer they wanted.

A relationship with 44 Farms changed that uncertainty to a guaranteed “yes.”

The Harts buy bulls from 44 Farms, use the AngusLinkSM AngusVerifiedSM program through IMI Global as a third-party verification, and Prime Pursuits — the farm entity formed to procure Angus-sired cattle for Walmart — purchases their calves. Today the family gets individual performance, grade and health information back through Prime IntelligenceTM, the platform Prime Pursuits

created to assimilate, share and analyze data on each head.

“I can’t even tell you how valuable that full transparency is,” Susan says. “We want to know if we’re doing well. We want to know if we’re not doing well. It’s the only way to get better.”

Their cattle were among the first to enter the initial study and be included into the database with genomic profiles through a pilot program, and the electronic

identification (eID) tags were paired with both genotypes and phenotypes.

Susan says the reports they receive confirm they’re moving in the right direction and inspire them to keep on that upward trajectory. Last year’s fed cattle sourced from their ranch reached 46% Prime. That compares to a national average of 9.2% across all breeds.

“It becomes an internal competition within your operation,” she says.

Knowing where it’s going

The Harts are an example of hundreds of cattlemen and women across the country who want more information on where their calves go and how they do, says BJ McElroy, COO at 44 Farms and Prime Intelligence lead.

“The rancher doesn’t usually have visibility into where their product goes,” he notes. When it’s sold through the fragmented beef production chain, it can be hard to get data back, but even harder to learn anything about its final destination. Prime Intelligence



“Shame on us if we’re not raising the best cattle we can with the limited and vital water resources available in our way,” Susan Hart says. “It’s a continuing process of learning and improving.”

Fulfilling their mission earns accolades

When Bob McClaren founded 44 Farms on his grandparents' land, he heard his father's voice in the back of his head: "Son, I know you love agriculture, but you can't make a living doing it. So, you need to do something where you can support your family."

On that advice, he spent years as a lawyer and later as president of the Houston Astros, but when the opportunity came, he put that experience to work in the cattle business.

"I thought there has to be a way," McClaren says, noting profit shouldn't be so elusive. So, he started researching genetics. "The Angus breed came up every time as *The Business Breed*, as we know it is, and I just started studying that."

A herd of 70 head grew to the business it is today with customers spread across the United States, and a relationship that provides beef for around 680 Walmart locations across the Southeast.

For their dedication to the greater beef community, data collection and genetic selection, 44 Farms recently earned the Beef Improvement Federation's (BIF) Outstanding Seedstock Producer of the Year award. They accepted the honor at the BIF symposium in Calgary this summer.

"Had it not been for all the work that people in the breed have



From left, Joe Epperly, 2023 BIF president, presents 2023 BIF Outstanding Seedstock Producer of the Year honors to Tracy Woods, 44 Farms chief genetics officer; Bob McClaren, 44 Farms owner; and Jarrod Payne, 44 Farms director of cattle operations.

done to build upon this great breed, then communicated the attributes of those cattle so well for decades, we wouldn't be here today," McClaren says. "Now we all enjoy the great place Angus has in the industry."

Editor's note: For additional highlights from the 2023 BIF symposium, including all honorees, visit www.bifsymposium.com.

creates that transparency, while also fulfilling Walmart's desire to create more trust in their meatcase with the McClaren Farms brand, McElroy says.

"The second pillar is really predictability," he says. When Prime Pursuits buys cattle, it works with Walmart to forecast a specific harvest date, typically 18 months out.

"Our whole lens has changed from feeding the animal to its optimal weight to making sure that it's at its optimal when we need it to finish. That's really two different metrics in terms of finish date versus when we need them to finish," McElroy says. When supply is tight in late spring, they may have to bring cattle forward. But making sure they select the right ones to short-feed is key to consistency.

Prime Pursuits is working with Texas A&M University climatology experts to try to add weather patterns into the algorithm and increase accuracy.

"We've got over 1,200 ranchers from 29 states that feed into 40 backgrounders in seven states, feeding into 10 feedyards in

three states — and that all goes to one packing house. So, there's a lot of stakeholders and levers in the system," McElroy says.

Before purchase, Prime Intelligence helps the procurement team predict an end point. But before cattle are even on the potential procurement list, they must meet the program requirements, including:

- ▶ Third-party verified as hormone free (many choose to use a non-hormone treated cattle, or NHTC, program)
- ▶ Sired by 100% registered Angus bulls
- ▶ Weaned a minimum of 45 days

Preference is given to those who use primarily 44 Farms bulls.

Once purchased, they're automatically included in Prime Intelligence. The eID tags become their Social Security Number of sorts, and they're checked into each location and recorded "basically anytime they're touched," McElroy says.

Feedyard data is collected daily, and weights are recorded every time they cross a scale. At the packer, they match carcass data

to eID, and that data is emailed to the producers as the groups are harvested.

"The key is what our producers do with the information they receive," says Tracy Woods, chief genetics officer for 44 Farms. He and his team often work with ranchers to apply the information and answer questions.

"We help each producer and identify their weaknesses and their strengths, and try to select genetics that are going to work best in their herds," he says. They give advice on genetic lines, or even specific bulls. The DNA tests can help them pinpoint more precisely, and the closeouts give clues on management tweaks.

"If they have a health issue, we reach out to them and try to help them figure it out," Woods says. "It's opened the door for greater communication, which leads to problem-solving and creative strategies."

They have several examples where they may have been hesitant to buy cattle from a specific ranch again after having a health

Continued on page 16

wreck, but once they addressed the problem it was a complete turnaround the next year.

Data-based decisions

“The data is just one more tool in our tool bag that allows us to make as informed a decision as possible so that the next year’s crop and the following year, through our replacements, is just going to get strong and better,” Susan says.

The Harts are the fifth generation and their daughter Alex, the sixth, to manage cattle on their Little Shasta Ranch; and they want that legacy to continue. As they began to get more attuned to the environmental pressures in California, they turned their attention to how to get the most (and best) beef product out of the land and water.

“How do we steward the cow herd in the most responsible and economically and socially responsible manner?” Susan asks.

That question led them to Angus.

“We obviously had to improve the carcass, but at the same time we were looking for strong maternal traits with underlying

docility, because we raise our own replacements. Our cow herd is the engine, and we need bulls with the optimum genetic

package who are fit with exceptional frame, bone and feet that would thrive in our semi-arid, rough-rock area and who will improve our herd over time,” Susan says.

“44 bulls land at the ranch with their work boots on. Ultrasound pregnancy data results this past June pegged a 95% herd pregnancy rate with a 78-84 day exposure during a rough winter season,” Blair adds.

Everyone pores over the spreadsheet before sale day, but Blair and Alex go evaluate bulls in person, pen by pen. They use numbers and eye appeal.

“That allows us to take incremental steps,” Susan says.

The way 44 Farms helps them tell their story and bridge a gap with the consumer is icing on the cake.

“I really think they love the partnership and feeling this sense of community,” McElroy says. “We certainly do. It is why we are in this business — to help producers.”

BJ McElroy

“They are partnering with operations such as ours that not only care deeply about the quality of the product they produce, but how they go about it,” she says.

The data is what moves ranchers forward collectively and individually. Knowing more about how the cattle are doing helps each person in the chain improve, and ultimately delivers on the 44 Farms promise to consumers — something the Harts feel strongly about, too.

“I really think they love the partnership and feeling this sense of community,” McElroy says. “We certainly do. It is why we are in this business — to help producers.” **ABB**

Editor’s note: Miranda Reiman is director of digital content and strategy for Angus Media.