

Southern Exposure

Mississippi Angus breeders set positive example.



Mississippi cattleman Mike Howell wants to set the record straight on Southeastern calves.

Story & photos by
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Southern Angus producers have some things to brag about. Their cattle perform well at the ranch and

at feedyards 1,000 miles away. But many “aren’t getting paid for it,” says Mike Howell, who wants to change that.

He’s the president of the Mississippi Angus Association and an Extension beef cattle specialist area agent at Mississippi State University. Howell, his brother Rick and partner Chip Waterer manage 200 cows near Baldwyn and Okolona, Miss. They send calves to a feedyard every other year to learn about performance at the other end of the production chain.

Howell and like-minded southern Angus producers keep looking for ways to put more money in the bank. But he’d like to see more commercial cattlemen get involved.

“More producers in the South are looking at carcass quality,” he says. “But not many are following through on the genetics they purchase at bull sales. They don’t promote the higher genetic potential behind their herds, so they don’t get paid for it.”

Exceptions to the rule

At least one exception is S.R.

Evans, a Greenwood, Miss., physician and Angus producer. Success of his cattle at the feedyard being well-established, Evans notes, “We can and do produce really good Angus cattle down here.”

Howell’s goal is to spread the word across the U.S. that Southeastern Angus and their crosses are proven performers.

“Some parts of the South have a bad reputation for sending poor doers to the feedyard,” he says. “But we’re convinced that [Angus-influenced] cattle in Mississippi and across the South perform about as well as Angus in other parts of the country.”

Howell is encouraging Angus producers, small and large, to do more than just wean their calves and haul them to the sale barn. “We’re trying to put together more special sales and truckload lots,” he says.

“People are beginning to learn that in order to market calves at the best rate, they need to have truckloads. That enables buyers to see more than just a small number of calves to go to stocker operators or the feedyard.”



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And it pays off.

A Mississippi Homeplace Producers Feeder Calf Sale last August provides a 1,900-head, 26-load example.

“Calves sold in truckload lots brought 6¢ to 10¢ per pound (lb.) more when compared to the local calf price at regional sale barns,” Howell says. “We attribute a good part of that to being able to fill the orders in truckloads.”

Ideally, producers can work with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlots to help identify their best performers, Howell says. “That’s how they can learn the true value of their genetics. They buy from good seedstock operators and think they are producing good calves, but they don’t really know.”

Howell says one way to maintain some interest in calves after weaning is to stand behind them through the AngusSource® program. “That will help them identify the sires of their calves,” he says, “and open the door to cooperation with the next buyer to share data on which are the best ones.”

Walking the walk

Evans has a long history of doing his part to improve southern Angus herd quality and marketing capabilities. He’s been counting on the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and data feedback to grow premiums for years.

He manages 500 Angus cows that have been carefully selected and culled.

“I’ve been working on marbling for 25 to 30 years,” Evans says. He often sends 200 to 250 calves to Irsik & Doll Feed Yard, a CAB partner yard near Garden City, Kan. From there, they are marketed to the National Beef packing plant in Dodge City, Kan.

“I get the data back from them,” Evans says. “I get a 4.5-pound average daily gain, with 80% to 90% of them grading Choice and about 30% CAB.” That’s nearly twice the national average.

“I regularly receive \$70 to \$100 per head premium because of their CAB and other carcass performance,” he adds.

Mark Sebranek, Irsik & Doll manager, says Evans’ cattle often “make us look good.”

“They’re phenomenal,” he says. “They come in with a little thin frame, but they convert well and really gain. His feed conversion rates average about 5.2 pounds [feed per lb. of gain]. They have been as low as 4.82.” That’s 40% more efficient than the industry average.

Irsik & Doll sorts smaller groups of cattle to get the most out of them.

“We treat small producers like the big boys,” says Sebranek, who encourages southern producers to select local Angus bulls. “They are much more adapted to the heat and humidity down south.”

Evans uses artificial insemination (AI) on about 20% of his cows, noting, “The majority of the calves are sired by our own bulls.”

Spring calves are usually pulled off cows about Oct. 1, the fall calves in March; in both cases weighing 500 to 600 lb. Calves get a modified-live vaccine for control of respiratory and intestinal diseases.

“We keep bulls based on EPDs [expected progeny differences],” Evans says. “We look at a number of things, including the projected muscling and marbling. We know our seedstock customers want bulls that have good performance data.”

Bulls not kept for sale or used are steered and sent to the feedyard or a regional sale, where buyers know their

background and proven performance of the herd.

This was not Howell’s year to feed, but the 2007 calves went to Kirkland Feedyard in Vega, Texas, which offers carcass data collection upon request. Another option is group data and a source-verification premium.

“We were more interested in that \$35 per head at the time,” Howell says. Group

data showed about 70% grading Choice and Prime. This year, his steers and heifers not kept for replacements sold through the state feeder-calf board sales.

Southern producers may follow these examples or explore other ways to partner with a CAB feedlot to realize the full value of their cattle.

