



Up Front

by **JOHN CROUCH**, chief executive officer, American Angus Association

Serving customers with EPD education

As I write this column for the March issue of the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, it is mid-January. Hopefully, by the time this magazine reaches the hands of readers, the weather will be kinder, moisture conditions will be favorable and little green shoots will be poking through the surface of the soil.

Understanding birth weight

It will almost be time to turn bulls with cows for those herds that practice spring calving. Accordingly, about 60% of the national cow herd calves in the spring, while 40% calves in the fall. As producers look at management practices that enhance efficiency, this percentage may change in favor of fall calving.

In consideration of the season wherein many bull sales are scheduled, it always seems appropriate to talk about factors that are involved in the selection process. Further to this point, a couple of days ago a longtime friend

and Angus breeder from Iowa called to inform me of a problem he was having.

"John," he said, "how do I respond to my bull buyers who tell me that the bull with a low-birth-weight (BW) expected progeny difference (EPD) that they purchased from me is siring heavy calves?" Then, the perennial question was posed, "If I use a bull with a +4.0-pound (lb.) birth EPD, what will his calves weigh?"

For those of us who have been working with EPDs for many years, the answers to these questions seem obvious. It is important to remember that many new people enter the cattle business each year. It is a flawed assumption to think that each one has a basic understanding of the decision-support tools that breeders apply to the process of selecting seedstock.

Predictions of differences

Simply put, EPDs are numbers that assist producers in the process

of seedstock selection. They quantify those factors that cannot be assessed visually.

Birth weight, for example, is one of many traits that cannot be subjectively assessed with any degree of accuracy. Birth weight is an important trait to accurately measure, simply because it has more to do with ease of calving than perhaps any other factor. The formulation for calculating BW EPD not only considers the individual birth weight of the animal in question but also the birth weights of thousands of relatives in the individual's pedigree to arrive at a prediction of the transmitting ability of that animal as a parent.

Because there are additional environmental factors that also affect birth weight, and other weights as well, BW EPD cannot be used to predict an actual weight. It can, however, be effectively used to predict the average differences in birth weight of the progeny of two sires, provided the

sires are mated to cows of comparable genetic merit for birth weight and managed under the same conditions.

The objective of characterizing birth weight is the elimination of calving trouble. Tremendous strides in technology have been made in recent years with the development of calving ease direct (CED) and calving ease maternal (CEM) EPDs, which incorporate birth weights, calving ease scores and the correlated relationships of other traits.

As the sales season moves into full swing, a big part of consumer relations and customer service involves assisting buyers with the necessary information they need to make the most intelligent decisions possible in the selection of seedstock. The American Angus Association has an abundance of information and literature explaining Angus EPDs and dollar value indexes (\$Values) that you can request. What's more, it's free of charge! Call the office at 816-383-5100, or call your regional manager to request these materials.

Finally, there are still a few EPD skeptics who offer isolated and varying accounts as to why EPDs do not work. Far be it from me to try to convince them otherwise. I, for one, could not imagine participating in the bull-buying process without them. Progressively minded commercial producers agree.



AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION®

3201 Frederick Ave. • Saint Joseph, MO 64506-2997

phone: 816-383-5100 • fax: 816-233-9703 • home page: www.angus.org

e-mail: angus@angus.org • Office hours: (M-F) 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (Central)

OFFICERS

Paul Hill, president & chairman of the board, 11503 SR 554, Bidwell, OH 45614; champion@jbnets.net

John Crouch, chief executive officer, 3201 Frederick Ave., Saint Joseph, MO 64506; jcrouch@angus.org

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Bill Davis, treasurer, 34840 CR 106, Sidney, MT 59270, rolnrok@hughes.net

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