# Your Link to CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF® BRAND

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## Dressing percentage

Many times the key to success in business is understanding how that is measured by your downstream customers. From their perspective, it's all about getting exactly what they want and need. When you know what that is, you can design a better product that ultimately leads to satisfied customers coming back for more.

The big pool of customers downstream is that ocean of consumers. But all along the riverbank and into the High Plains are chefs, retailers, distributors, packers and feedlots, each with exacting standards for commercial calves. Most of those carry Angus genetics, so the Angus seedstock sector is the spring.

Feedlot managers may not be the ones buying bulls at your sale, but they sure influence the cow-calf producers who are. We might assume that seedstock and commercial Angus producers understand each other better than they know the feedlot business, so the first big step to greater success is to meet feedlot demand.

### Dressing percent

If you spend much time talking with a feedlot manager about components of profitable cattle, it won't be long until he or she starts talking about "dressing percent." Once they think you get that, they may start referring to it as "yield," even though it is not the same as Yield Grade. Dressing percent is simply the percent of a live, finished steer or heifer that ends up in the carcass form. The math is pretty straightforward: If a 1,300-pound (lb.) live steer produces an 819-lb. hot carcass, the carcass divided by liveweight equals 0.63, or 63%.

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Historically, as cattle feeders sold finished cattle on a live-weight basis, dressing percent was only calculated by packers. They understood the math of course, and knowing the implications as well, they made adjustments in their bids based on what they believed the dressing percent would be. Today, with more and more cattle sold on a grid or formula basis, carcass weight is the base for payment, so dressing percent is always top of mind for those who seek to market above-average cattle.

A few percentage points (ppt.) of difference doesn't sound like a big deal in this number that can range from less than 57% to more than 67%, but when you put a pencil to it and figure in today's relatively high prices, those points really add up. In a carcass beef market of $190 per hundredweight (cwt.), a 4 percentage point difference on a 1,300-lb. steer amounts to a $100 difference in the take-home check (see Table 1).

What's more, many grids or formula pricing systems incentivize above-average dressing percentage. Since the base price is calculated using a plant average, beating that dressing percentage puts more dollars in the producer's pocket.

### Managing dressing percent

Managing dressing percent in your cattle starts with a firm grasp of the factors that can influence it. Studies have concluded that dressing percent has a heritability of about 0.35, meaning it is influenced by genetics, but about 65% is due to environment or management.

It stands to reason that what adds weight to the live animal, like horns (non-Angus) or extra hide (Brahman influence), but are not transferred to the carcass have a negative effect on dressing percentage. Varying amounts of mud on the cattle can have a huge effect, but that can be very difficult to manage. Gut fill is another factor, influenced by diet (mainly the moisture content and relative bulk), transportation distance to packing plant, and animal body type (see Table 2). Cattle feeders may note slight differences in dressing percentage between packing plants based on hide-pulling technique and workmanship.

Fat cover is highly related to dressing percentage; as cattle get fatter, dressing percent goes up. Of course, overly fat cattle are not the goal, but genetics and days on feed (DOF) certainly come into play. We shouldn't breed cattle that are excessively fat, but as more feedlots market their cattle on a carcass-weight basis, managers have extended DOF.

Late in the feeding phase, a higher percentage of an animal's gain is fat, but it stays on the carcass — so the cost of a unit of "carcass gain" can encourage longer feeding periods. Ultimately, the cattle feeder's marketing goal is to balance dressing percent, quality grade premiums, yield grade discounts, carcass weight discounts and incremental cost of gain.

The amount of muscling is also highly related to dressing percent.

**Table 1: Value difference due to dressing percent**

| | Steer A | Steer B |
|---|---|---|
| Liveweight | 1,300 lb. | 1,300 lb. |
| Dressing % | 65% | 61% |
| Hot carcass wt. | 845 lb. | 793 lb. |
| Carcass value, @$190/cwt. | $1,605.50 | $1,506.70 |
| Value difference | $98.80 | |

**Table 2: How various environmental factors affect dressing percent**

| Factor | | Impact on dressing % |
|---|---|---|
| Mud | ↑ | ↓ |
| Gut fill | ↑ | ↓ |
| Fat cover | ↑ | ↑ |
| Muscling | ↑ | ↑ |
| Horns | ↑ | ↓ |
| Hide | ↑ | ↓ |

Growth technologies like implants and beta-agonists that add muscle mass consequently improve dressing percentage. Genetic makeup explains a significant share of difference in muscling, especially if you compare beef to dairy-type cattle. The latter are much lighter-muscled and have a higher proportion of their liveweight in the front and middle parts of the body.

Differences can also be seen within beef-type cattle, with advantages typically going to the Continental breeds. Many feedlot managers say Angus cattle can generally be improved by adding more muscle, which improves dressing percentage.

With that general view in mind, and especially where problems are known to exist, there are sound strategies Angus breeders and commercial cattlemen should consider for making improvement. The ribeye area expected progeny difference (REA EPD) is the best tool to use for putting selection pressure on muscling. Of course, all traits should work into a breeding program with balance in mind.

Breeders know about genetic antagonisms between muscling and maternal traits, so monitor pregnancy rates and be careful to not go overboard in your pursuit of more muscle.

With the array of genetic tools offered by the American Angus Association, cattlemen can identify and select Angus genetics with strong maternal traits that not only come easy, grow fast and grade well, but also impress the cattle feeder with their dressing percentage. Using those tools, smart cattlemen can have it all.

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