Your Link to

by **STEVE SUTHER,** *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Should you crossbreed?

A recent nationwide survey indicated 60% of cow herds are primarily Angus-based, 75% of ranchers had at least some Angus influence in their herds, and two-thirds of them bought Angus bulls in the last year. That suggests a great many of them are not crossbreeding. Most have very good reasons.

It's sensible to continually evaluate your breeding program. Whether you are crossbreeding or using straightbred Angus, you need to be sure it's right for your mission statement.

The *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, the not-for-profit company owned by all members of the American Angus Association, was designed for the commercial cattle industry to include crossbreds. It could not have achieved its mission of adding value to registered-Angus cattle were it limited to their direct progeny.

Rather, it would rely on market forces and the advancing tools of genetic selection to incentivize and guide cattlemen to produce cattle that are the most profitable for everyone at every step along the supply chain. That's what is happening; the market is leading Angus producers away from crossbreeding.

Seedstock Angus producers, some with their own commercial herds and certainly through their bull customers, have shown leadership in demonstrating the superior value of high-percentage Angus calves after weaning. They keep up on the research and know by experience that it costs nothing to add marbling to balanced-trait selection, and it builds the value of commercial-Angus calves.

If you are following a structured crossbreeding program, your seedstock supplier may have pointed out the CAB *Best Practices Manual* at *www.cabpartners.com* as a reference for expected progeny difference (EPD) percentiles to aim for when selecting registered-Angus bulls (see table). For herds already Angus or English-based, just be sure to stay above breed average. For Continental-based or highly crossed herds, the marbling EPD should be in the top 25th percentile for those who want to make progress toward the CAB target.

If cows are not primarily Angus, but a commercial rancher is choosing Angus bulls as part of a crossbreeding program, they should not leave it up to "breed complementarity" and assume any Angus bull delivers the best of Angus genetics.

Millions of crossbred calves have met the CAB specifications, but nearly all of them have done so incidentally, almost accidentally. The ranch of origin typically does not retain ownership, or it does not include higher CAB acceptance as a goal.

Iowa's Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) data on nearly 30,000 head shows high-percentage Angus cattle are six times more likely to grade Prime and nearly three times more likely to qualify for CAB than those with less than one-quarter Angus genetics. Similarly, the higher the percent Angus in that database, the better their health and feedlot performance. Everything works together.

No accident

Genetics have improved greatly among Angus-influenced cattle during the past 10 years, to where 25% of all evaluated cattle can achieve the premium-Choice level of marbling required for CAB acceptance in many areas of the country.

That market-driven shift involving millions of cattle is tied into the trend toward less crossbreeding rather than more. Every time a producer of 40%, 60%, 80% or even 100% CAB-accepted loads of cattle tells their story, it is one that features carefully selected, straightbred-Angus genetics managed profitably. They are raising commercial-Angus cattle like they mean it.

It is not just about keeping a herd black or even Angus. Your customers should have a complete plan from breeding to market. If they are keeping calves black but not taking some steps to improve their herd, profitability and reputation with data feedback and selection, they might as well start crossbreeding. The science is solid. Crossbreeding will add pounds to their calves, all else being equal. Cows may stay in the herd longer, whether or not they represent improving genetics.

There is nothing wrong with trying to just raise heavy weaning calves, other than it typically fails to build consumer demand for beef, which supports future profitability.

Demand for quality

Kansas State University (K-State) research using 2002 beef supply and price as a base shows demand for Select much lower, although demand for Choice was up by 20% until 2010, when it, too, began to erode and has now fallen below the base year. By contrast, demand for CAB stood at 208, or a 108% increase at the start of this year (see "Defining and Quantifying Certified Angus Beef Brand Consumer Demand," at *www.cabpartners.com/research*).

Responding to that, packers paid nearly $50 million per year over the past two years in grid premiums for CAB-accepted cattle, to say nothing of the millions paid for the ideal target, USDA Prime. To illustrate momentum, 30% of all grid premiums ever paid for CAB have been in the past three years. The market drives everything in business, and if the market tells more producers to crossbreed, they will do that.

Tom Brink, while serving as president of J&F Oklahoma Holdings, addressed the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) meeting last summer. He noted that the top 10%-15% of cattle (among 1.6 million fed each year for the packer JBS) at their feedlots gained 4.75 lb. per day and converted at a ratio of 5.25 to 1. They were worth $219 per head above average on the grid. He said those pens included some crossbred cattle, and some straightbred Angus cattle.

The crossbreds may have had the edge in performance, but the Angus held their own and outgraded them. Moreover, Brink said a straightbred Angus program can stack genetics for gain and grade enough to realize as much profit from five calves as a crossbred cow would with six. He admitted that most producers should use crossbreeding, however.

"Straightbreeding is appropriate for others who are serious about creating high-performance, high-value calves that will top the market and be highly demanded by cattle feeders," he said. "This appears to be the reason why a significant number of producers forego known advantages of crossbreeding to pursue a different path they find equally rewarding."

You may know some of those commercial-Angus producers, as their ranks are growing with the market demand. Ask any of them if they are leaving money on the table. Ask them what breed of bull they want to use on those cows next year.

If you operate a dairy and a feedlot, you could try various crossbreeding schemes with varying degrees of luck reaching the Prime grade. Out on the ranch, choices are more limited, and most businessmen aim to keep it simple while producing the best they can, profitably.

Table 1: Genetic Recommendations

Cow herd genetics: Angus or other English base			
	EPD	**Percentile**	**EPD value**
Marbling	Marb	Top 40%	+0.45 or higher
Ribeye	RE	Top 50%	+0.31 or higher
Backfat	Fat	Mid 80%	+0.042 to -0.020
Carcass Index	$ Grid ($G)	Top 50%	+25.52 or higher

*Based on percentiles from the Spring 2013 Angus Sire Summary • Current Sires

Cow herd genetics: Continental/highly crossbred, medium-framed			
	EPD	**Percentile**	**EPD value**
Marbling	Marb	Top 25%	+0.57 or higher
Ribeye	RE	Top 50%	+0.31 or higher
Backfat	Fat	Mid 80%	+0.042 to -0.020
Carcass Index	$ Grid ($G)	Top 35%	+30.09 or higher

*Based on percentiles from the Spring 2013 Angus Sire Summary • Current Sires

Cow herd genetics: Continental/highly crossbred, large-framed			
	EPD	**Percentile**	**EPD value**
Marbling	Marb	Top 25%	+0.57 or higher
Ribeye	RE	Mid 80%	-0.03 to +0.68
Backfat	Fat	No recommendation	
Carcass Index	$ Grid ($G)	Top 35%	+30.09 or higher

*Based on percentiles from the Spring 2013 Angus Sire Summary • Current Sires

Editor's Note: *Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*