



Your Link to



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Don't forget the value driver

More than likely, your Angus cattle are part of the five-year rise in beef quality grades all across the United States. Their ability to gain and grade is part of the breed's growing competitive advantage.

But this is no time to let up on the pedal. The new dollars that set Angus above the rest all come from the consumer's pocket, and research keeps telling us they buy beef for its taste and tenderness. In fact, those two traits explain 91% of the variation in eating quality. Those are the reasons people will keep buying beef — if producers can keep delivering.

You have to maintain genetic pressure because those upward trends don't

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just fall into place. There is still a wide range from the top 1% with an expected progeny difference (EPD) for marbling (MARB) of 0.99 to the bottom 5% with MARB at 0.02, according to American Angus Association data (www.angus.org/Nce/PercentBreakdown.aspx).

Notice that not even those at the bottom show a negative MARB figure. So, it says very little to point out that your bull battery has "positive EPDs for marbling."

The EPDs calculated today are different numbers than those of several years ago, but using August 2011 figures, it looks like you could have owned "positive" MARB bulls in 1983, when that number reached +0.01 (<http://angus.org/Nce/GeneticTrends.aspx>). At the same time, weaning weight (WW) EPD was 7, yearling (YW) was 12 and calving ease direct (CED) was headed toward "negative." By just about any standard, the Angus breed has made great improvements since then. Look at the steep climb in YW EPD, for example (see Fig. 1).

Selecting for marbling

The roots of our currently increasing quality grades may go back to those days, when breeders with vision decided to change selection pressure. By the 2000 decade, evidence was abundant.

Birth-year sire MARB increased from 0.21 to 0.40 from 2000 to 2010 (see Fig. 2), and that EPD for the top 10 usage sires for each period moved up from 0.31 to 0.61. Moreover, the share of all Angus registrations sired by those top 10 moved up from 13.1% in 2000 to 17.1% in 2010.

Compared to 10 years earlier, those top Angus sires of this year's progeny have dropped a pound of birth weight while picking up 30 pounds (lb.) of yearling weight, yet also shedding 10 lb. of mature weight.

The trend is supported in actual carcass data turned into the Association. Carcass weights are 30 lb. heavier, ribeye areas are 0.7 square inches larger, marbling scores are nearly a full unit higher and external fat is lower.

It takes a long time to change the genetics and management of millions

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Fig. 1: Genetic trend in yearling weight EPD, by sire birth year

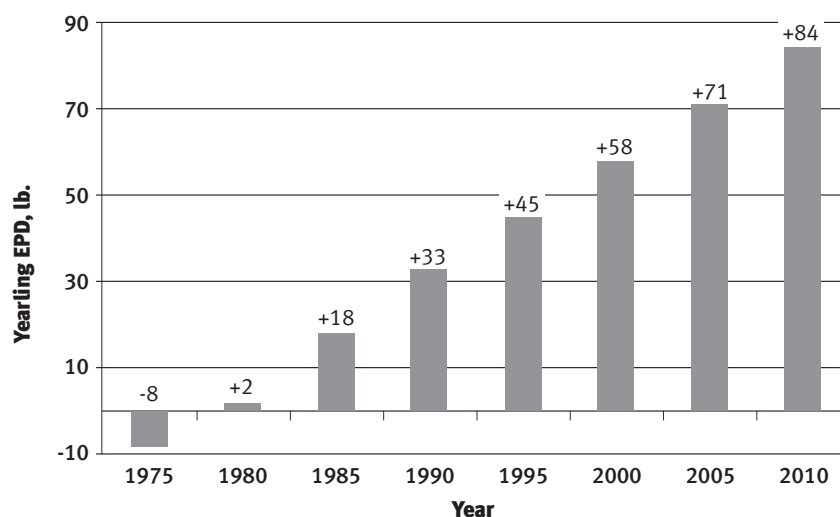


Fig. 2: Angus EPD trend for marbling

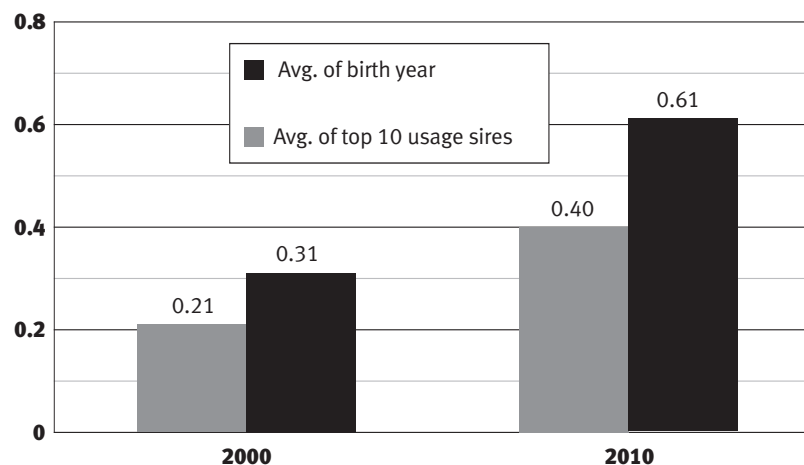
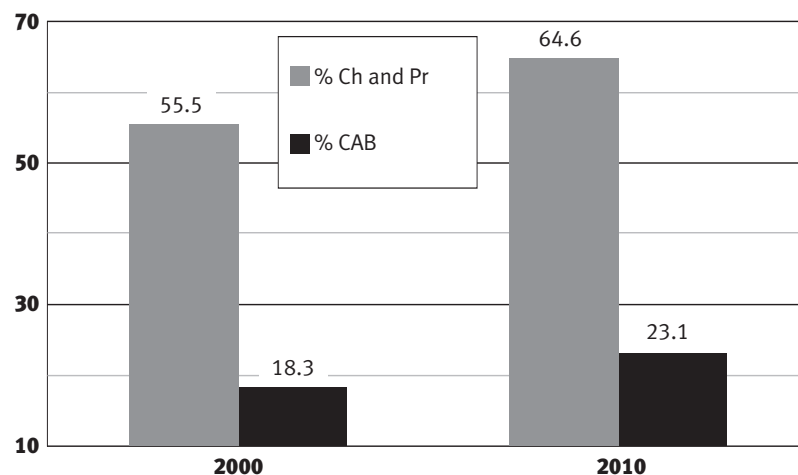


Fig. 3: % Choice and higher and % CAB® brand acceptance



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of cows, but many of the trend lines maintain their direction across decades. The Angus-influenced share of fed cattle in the nation's federally inspected harvest mix has increased from 33% in 1995 to 40% in 2000 and 65% this year. Surveys indicate three-fourths of the nation's cows carry Angus genetics, and at least

60% of the bulls turned out are registered Angus.

One result of these changes is the gain in the ratio of USDA Choice and *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance within the fed-cattle harvest mix (see Fig. 3). Moreover, some producers have begun to see the rich

rewards from having 10%-20% CAB Prime in that mix.

Anybody would conclude that genetics have played a large role and that EPDs work. Their upward trends match what has happened in the industry. But the very fact that they work raises a caution flag if we look at the last few years of MARB, rather than just comparing 2000 and 2010.

Caution flag

The average MARB of 0.40 looks good for 2010, unless you consider it was 0.44 in 2009 and 0.42 in 2008. Could be just an aberration, but the last time MARB fell back even one point was in 1973. Let's hope the 2010 setback does not reflect a longer-term reduction of selection pressure on marbling or a turning away from the Angus mission of improving end-product quality.

There's no reason to back away, no threshold level of marbling that science has determined as sufficient in breeding stock, no level beyond which selection for marbling is known to be harmful to other economically important traits. Of course, feed efficiency is top of mind today, but the Angus breed's advances in residual average daily gain (RADG) have come about concurrent with the gains in MARB.

For consumers, it takes more money to buy any beef than the competing proteins, so it better not disappoint.

Angus cattle have had a natural advantage from the start, and "the butcher's breed" has stood the test of time. But only in the last few decades have Angus producers been able to use modern technology and statistical tools to take a leading position in the U.S. beef industry.

To ensure that position remains strong, the Angus cattle community must maintain its balanced but upward pressure on all economically important traits to include MARB. That is the path to further separation from other breeds of cattle by adding to the Angus competitive advantage.

Beyond that, the industry needs your leadership to demonstrate best management practices and coordination that can fully realize the improving genetic potential. With all the market volatility, record-high grain prices and aggressive growth technologies, now more than ever, cattle feeders need healthy calves with dependable genetics that can make the most out of costly feedstuffs.

They need high-percentage Angus calves packed with the propensity to grade and the inherent growth pattern to deposit marbling from the start in what may trend toward shorter feeding periods.

For consumers, it takes more money to buy any beef than the competing proteins, so it better not disappoint. For the future of demand, they must be able to buy beef that provides an overwhelming likelihood of a pleasurable eating experience. That is true not only in North America, but all across a world that is hungry for high-quality beef.