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Genomic Tools for Balanced Commercial Cows

Live-animal demonstration encourages producers to consider female selection tools to help them produce the kind of beef consumers prefer.

by **TROY SMITH**, *field editor*

It's not hard to understand why cattle producers should care about consumer preferences. After all, dollars spent at the meat counter represent the beef industry's only source of new money. Consumer dollars trickle back through the production chain — from retailer to packer, then to the cattle feeder, then to the stocker operator and cow-calf producer, and finally to the seedstock breeder. Do consumer preferences really influence the kind of cows found on this nation's commercial cow outfits?

During the Angus Means Business National Convention & Trade Show Nov. 3-5 in Overland Park, Kan., Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Vice President Mark McCully and Zoetis Technical Services Associate Director Kent Andersen talked about how consumer preferences do affect the commercial cow. They urged cattlemen to consider female selection tools designed to further the production of calves that yield the kind of beef that a growing percentage of consumers prefer.

McCully said the No. 1 reason consumers choose beef over alternative protein sources is its "unique and desirable taste." Calling intramuscular fat, or marbling, the primary contributor to taste, McCully cited recent Colorado State University data suggesting that the consumer eating experience improves with increased marbling.

While beef is more expensive than the alternatives, retail sales suggest that many consumers still perceive beef as the greater value. McCully noted annual average beef cutout values showing a \$250 value difference between Select and Prime carcasses of the same weight.

"The Millennial generation appears to be less sensitive to price. Our Millennials like beef!" stated McCully. "We are selling more Prime and branded (premium Choice) beef than Select at a higher price than ever before. Cattle qualifying for CAB



PHOTOS BY KASEY BROWN

now represent about 15% of the fed-cattle mix, and that should continue to grow."

Referring to the rebuilding of the national cow herd, which is under way, and the eventual increase in numbers of feeder cattle, McCully predicted more value differentiation in the feeder-cattle market. This, he added, can be used to advantage by sellers using feeder-cattle certification programs.

Kent Andersen agreed, saying cattle feeders will have to decide whether to fill pens with commodity cattle, at

a lower cost, or pay more for value-added cattle. Andersen said providing buyers with information about genetics, health and other management practices lends premium-worthy performance predictability to feeder cattle. He encouraged producers to consider certification programs offered by Top Dollar Angus Inc., offering third-party genetic verification, and Reputation Feeder Cattle, offering genetic, calf management plus age and source verification.

Andersen also described how the GeneMax[®] Advantage[™] genomic test can aid selection of commercial replacement females most likely to produce high-value feeder calves in the future. A collaborative creation of Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI), CAB and Zoetis, the DNA test provides cattle owners with results including three selection index scores.

According to Andersen, the Cow Advantage Score predicts differences in profitability from heifer development, pregnancy, calving ease, milk production,

Evaluating what's below the surface

Kent Andersen, associate director of technical services for Zoetis Inc., led an audience-participation evaluation of registered-Angus bulls and heifers. The fun and educational program was Session 2 of the Zoetis-sponsored "Genetic Connections: Angus Game Plan for Breeders and Commercial Customers" at the Angus Means Business National Convention & Trade Show Nov. 3.

Mark McCully, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) vice president of supply, and Tonya Amen, then genetic service director for Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI), joined in the presentation.

Amen noted the economic assumptions for AGI genetic prediction tools will move to July updating rather than December and explained that AGI cooperates with Zoetis in running the i50K genomic test for registered cattle.

"With the lower-density test,

the computer can impute the full picture from fewer markers, all at 98% concordance," she explained. "Rankings are virtually the same as with HD50K, but at a much lower cost."

When five bulls from KW Cattle Co., Fort Scott, Kan., entered the exhibition pen, Andersen noted different styles of bull selection.

"People may scour the [sale books] and websites, researching bulls before they look, or pick their favorites just before a sale and then check the numbers," he said. "In this case, we'll look first." The audience of 125 liked what they saw, especially the No. 5 bull, preferred by 35%, while 27% favored the No. 4 bull.

Discussing the numbers to come, McCully said each breeder should have a plan, though each will prioritize traits differently based on their needs and environment.

"How important is calving ease, milk or growth? Sometimes we pick bulls based on high or low numbers, but that's probably not the best plan," he said.

Andersen said a calving ease direct EPD of 8 or higher works for many operations, but those solely reliant on heifers calving unassisted go for "double-digit" calving ease. "Others have the labor and don't mind a few easy pulls, so they can take a lower number if they get other traits they want in the package," he said.

That No. 5 bull was noted as the "Yes Man" bull because no matter the role it would be asked to fill, the answer was yes, it can do that. Andersen showed how i50K genomic testing made that bull look even better when numbers were revealed. In the final poll, 45% of the audience picked him, and although the No. 4

growth and cow costs, to the sale of weaned progeny. Feeder Advantage Scores predict differences in net return of feeder-calf progeny due to transmitted genetics for postweaning growth, feed efficiency, carcass weight and CAB carcass merit. A Total Advantage Score predicts differences in profitability from genetic merit across all traits evaluated by the test.

The Sire Match feature can be used



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to plan matings, matching females with bulls that allow for optimization of genetic strengths while addressing weaknesses. Andersen said owners of females also receive a SMART Outlier Report identifying females that may be genetically least desirable relative to cow cost, docility and beef tenderness.

McCully encouraged producers to

gear up for the future, telling them to anticipate more feeder-calf buyers to seek documentation of calf genetics and management. They should anticipate wider price spreads on the basis of quality.

“Genomics,” stated McCully, “could be a game-changer.”

This Innovation Workshop was sponsored by Zoetis.



Editor's Note: Troy Smith is a cattleman and freelance writer from Sargent, Neb. This article is part of Angus Media's coverage of the 2015 Angus Means Business National Convention and Trade Show. Complete coverage of the event is available at www.angusjournal.com/NCnTS/2015/index.html.

bull ranked lowest with numbers revealed, all of the bulls hit double-digit poll numbers.

Looking at five registered heifers from Slocombe's BJ Angus Genetics, Manhattan, Kan., the audience again saw excellent quality. Asked to choose a favorite by looks alone, the audience went for No. 4 at 46%, with No. 3 at 35%, largely ignoring No. 1 until results of her i50K genomics test were revealed and she earned the name “Topper,” with numbers that showed excellence across the board.

“Some of you might wonder why anyone would use that test on registered heifers,” Andersen said, “but it is an investment that pays in a lifetime of more precise breeding decisions.”

— by **Steve Suther,**
Certified Angus Beef LLC