

# Pool for Profit

*West Virginia calf pools help members stay informed.*

Story & photos by  
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During his more than half century in the cattle business, Jim Michaels has seen many changes. Some were good, and some were not so good, but information on his cattle provided through his participation in the West Virginia Calf Pool is definitely on his good list.

Michaels manages 50 commercial Angus cows on his farm near Morgantown. He has been marketing calves through the calf pool since its beginning almost 20 years ago.

"For years the only information we had was from weaning weights, and that was only a guideline at best," he says. "Like everyone else in this business, we are just striving to

meet the demands of the market, and all of the information programs we are using really seem to be paying off. They help take a lot of the guesswork out of cattle breeding."

Phillip Osborne, director of the pool based out of the Morgantown Extension office at West Virginia University (WVU), agrees that data and feedback have helped breeders improve their cattle.

"I have noticed in this calf pool, as well as others across the state, that quality improves dramatically when breeders begin to develop a focus on what will work and what doesn't, and make necessary adjustments," he says. "We look at our program as a way to develop a reputation for good cattle by using the same management practices every year and doing all we can to improve on genetics."

He says members are encouraged to make use of data available through expected progeny differences (EPDs) and programs like Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) and the American Angus Association's Beef Record Service (BRS).

Most breeds have been represented in the pool at one time or another, but Osborne says the American Angus Association plays a large role in the Morgantown pool, as well as in most of the 13 other West Virginia calf pools. He attributes this to the traits of the breed and to the data made available by the Association. Records show that all Morgantown pool members have used at least one Angus bull, and with the group using only Angus bulls during the last several years, about five-eighths to seven-eighths of the cows are Angus.

All members of the pool are required to be BQA-certified in the Mid-Atlantic BQA and to follow all guidelines, including tagging calves with BQA tags. BQA became part of the pool shortly after it was introduced by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) in 1999 in order to educate breeders on the increasing importance of food safety issues in the cattle industry.

## Introducing BRS

Although the BRS program is relatively new, it was introduced to the pool two years ago, with most Morgantown members participating to some extent. Another pool in the state is contemplating the use of the program for next year, while members of other West Virginia pools participate as individuals.

"We had been looking for some type of program to give our producers access to performance data on their cattle," Osborne says. "We wanted to give breeders a tool that could provide meaningful data, giving them control over their herd records. Most programs we looked at proved to be too labor-intensive on input data, and lack of computer skills and time were a problem for most of our members."

He says information turnaround was slow with one program they tried, and the data was often getting back to producers after the calves were sold. Matt Perrier, director of commercial programs for the American Angus Association, was invited to explain how BRS worked before they decided to try it.

In presenting an overview of BRS to the West Virginia group, Perrier

says he stressed the fact that the program is user-friendly, with breeders being able to send their information via the Internet, fax or regular mail.

"There are a lot of software programs available that are similar to the BRS, but you have to use the applications fairly often, and most cattle producers aren't able to do that," Perrier says. "They may enter records a couple of times a year, and that is about all they want to do. We have structured the BRS to be pretty simple. All we require is that the cattle be identified. That includes the cow, the calf and the sire or sire groups; an approximate birth date; and an individual weaning weight. That is just five pieces of information."

To enter the information, producers fill out the forms, and the Association will input it into the system. If producers use the Internet, they can enter their own information online at [www.angusbrs.com](http://www.angusbrs.com).

"You don't have to be a computer whiz to use the program," says Perrier, who describes it as pretty self-explanatory. "We find the majority still fill out the paper forms, but they tend to view their records online."

Robby Moody, sales representative of Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica, Inc. (BI), also attended the West Virginia meeting. He offered breeders the basic premise of a partnership with the company, giving members in any of the West Virginia calf pools the ability to submit up to two years' worth of calf records, if registered prior to July 15, free of charge if they were using BI products. BI and the Association split the \$2-per-head fee.

## Organizing the calf pool

Osborne says BRS is another resource that is helping the West Virginia beef industry progress from where it was when he joined the West Virginia Extension service in 1981. At that time, the state's commercial beef production was challenged with remaining competitive while lacking both economies of scale and market access. Composed primarily of small, part-time production units that were providing supplemental income for many families, a calf pool seemed to be the answer in helping the state's beef industry.

Osborne says he literally went from farm to farm, knocking on doors, inviting beef producers to join a calf pool. The Morgantown pool, one of the charter pools in the state, was formed in 1984. Starting with just five members who barely made a load of 500-pounders, the pool has grown to include 18 active producers tagging a combined 970 calves. Weights of the calves have also increased, with last year's group



Participants in the Morgantown, W.Va., calf pool discuss issues concerning their cattle. From left are Robert Straight; Clinton Butcher; Jim Michaels; Charles Sutton; and Phillip Osborne, director.



Breeders who don't have facilities to separate the calves for preconditioning will send them to the pool weaning lot, south of Morgantown, where they will remain for 45 days.

weighing in the 600-pound (lb.) range.

The calves are sold through the Buckhannon Stockyards Sale, along with those from other West Virginia pools. Most are bred for the high-quality end market and are sold into Ohio, Illinois and Pennsylvania, where Osborne says there is that niche through packers such as Moyer Packing Co. and Taylor Packing Co. Inc.

The sales are held the last week of September or the first week of October. In 2002, 3,300 calves were sold in the first sale, and 1,800 were sold in the second sale. This year, plans are being made to add a third sale in November, giving breeders an opportunity to sell lighter calves a little later.

Meetings for the Morgantown pool are organized three or four times each year. The spring meeting is used to provide updates on any carcass information from the previous year's calf crop and to issue ear tags. Although the health program is basically the same every year, everyone is brought up to date on any changes in vaccination protocols for calves and what to expect in the upcoming fall.

A final count is taken at the fall meeting, and the group orders vaccines and preconditioning feed. All calves are dewormed and vaccinated with the same vaccines, using the same vaccine lot numbers if possible. Osborne says the breeders are encouraged to try to work from the same program, generally starting to vaccinate during the first week in August, with the goal of vaccinating all calves during the same seven days.

Twenty-one days later, the calves are taken off the cow and given a booster shot. At this point, the breeders who don't have facilities to separate the calves for preconditioning will send them to the pool weaning lot, south of Morgantown, where they will remain for 45 days. At the end of that period, calves tagged for the program are graded either at the farm or the weaning lot by the West Virginia Department of Agriculture. This data is assembled and sent out on the sale sheet.

Prior to the sale, everyone works to load and gather in the remainder of the calves for weighing and penning. Steers are processed one day and heifers another. Payment to each breeder is made directly from the stockyard.

Osborne says he generally tries to have a meeting immediately following the sale, while everything is fresh in the producers' minds.

"We discuss any problems, such as sickness, that may have happened immediately following weaning, and we also try to follow up with the buyers," he says. "Last year we got the group together and had a teleconference with all of the buyers to get their feedback. That was done just 30 days after the calves were shipped, and it gave the breeders the opportunity to ask the buyers questions and to hear their comments."

With this type of data and from looking at other programs across the



Formed in 1984 with just five members who barely made a load of 500-pounders, the Morgantown pool has grown to include 18 active producers tagging a total of 970 calves. Last year's group averaged in the 600-lb. range. [PHOTO COURTESY OF WEST VIRGINIA CALF POOL]

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country, Osborne says changes have been made, such as lengthening the weaning period from 30 to 45 days. Members of the pool agree that the lengthened period has resulted in fewer complaints and has gained them more money in the long run because calves are able to recover more extensively, and they weigh more at sale time.

"We don't try to get the calves fat by any means," Osborne explains. "In this pool and many others in the state, we have always tried to promote them to wean on half forages and half preconditioner feed so they can either go to a backgrounding lot or straight to a feedlot with minimal stress."

**Developing a genetics program**

Bulls used in the program must either be performance tested or have EPDs that are above breed average, so calves can be sold as performance advantage feeder cattle. To achieve this goal, Osborne says bulls used by the group had previously come from

test stations until a decision was made to buy a set of embryo bulls through Knoll Crest Farm Inc., Red House, Va.

Knoll Crest allowed the group to select cows to flush to sires of the group's choosing to produce the bulls the group would use for herd sires. Osborne says they selected cows of similar breeding, then selected two sires because of their maternal value.

The ET bulls had stronger

yearling EPDs than what most of the producers had used in the past, Osborne says. Additional bulls with similar bloodlines were also purchased.

"Our goal is to basically build a uniform cow herd, and I see this improving dramatically every year," he says.

From that point on, Osborne says he has been closely watching data to prevent the loss of hybrid vigor. He has noted that although

some herds have lost a bit of cow size, most have moderated back. Data is starting to show a concern on carcass weights.

"We may have to either change the type of Angus bulls we are using or go back to a crossbreeding program, but our real goal is to use an Angus cow that is very similar across the board," Osborne says.

"In four or five years the use of the BRS program will have basically developed a cow herd history for the breeders and will give them data for reference when deciding on keeping heifers," he adds. "As it demonstrates how well the program works, more people will come into it. The BRS is quickly developing a reputation for being helpful, and it will give [commercial cattlemen] a third-party recordkeeping program, which we will probably need down the road for identification purposes. It is also a way of passing the records on to the next producer when we market these calves."



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**Input from calf pool members**

Robert Straight, Morgantown, W.Va., manages a herd of 35 registered Angus females and 15 commercial females. All his calves are marketed through the West Virginia Calf Pool, and he feels being a member has paid off in many ways.

"Back when my father was in the business, everything was just kind of guesswork," he says. "Since I have gotten into the operation and the calf pool, most of us have based a lot of our decisions on weaning weight ratios. It would have been a lot easier if we could have gotten more carcass information back, but that is like pulling hens' teeth, and the little bit that has filtered back has never been as much as we would like."

Since using carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs) and having his replacement heifers scanned by ultrasound for the last two years, Straight has made some changes in his breeding program.

"Scanning the heifers gave me a chance to look inside to see what I was keeping," he explains. "So far, I have found that marbling is good, but calves were a little short on ribeyes. This past year, I have tried to correct that problem by trying to use bulls with larger ribeyes."

Straight is looking for cattle that are uniform and will fit the marketplace, but also pay their way. He says the American Angus Association's Beef Record Service (BRS) will fill in missing information and help achieve that goal.

"Actually, I find the program is pretty easy to use, and I intend to start filing my information online because it should be faster and simpler. It may be a little extra work, but it will pay off in the end," Straight says.

Clinton Butcher, Waynesburg, Pa., is a charter member of the Morgan-

town calf pool. He manages a herd of 39 crossbred cows, mostly Angus-Hereford and Angus-Gelbvieh crosses, on his farm located just across the state line.

"I started out as a straight-Hereford breeder, but if they aren't black in this part of the country, they aren't worth the money, and I have learned you have got to go where the market dictates. Also, the American Angus Association does a better job of marketing and a better job providing EPDs and services like the BRS."

Butcher says the calf pool has helped him to plan his breeding program and to even out the peaks and valleys in prices. He says the calf pool helps breeders offer a consistent product with a good reputation that is generally at the top of the state's cattle market.

"In any business, you have to be able to produce a product that satisfies your customer, and in ours, that is the feeder and the consumer," Butcher says. "All of our members have had cattle pulled, either by the grader, or because they simple didn't fit, and most times we don't like it, but it's all for the good of our market and helps us make more money. That is what turns the whole thing."

"By using the BRS program, we can get some source verification on what we are selling, what they will do for the feeder that buys them, and it should be a great help when selecting cows," he continues.

Charles Sutton, Morgantown, W.Va., has a herd of 38 cows made up of Angus-Hereford and Angus-Gelbvieh crosses. His operation was started by his grandfather and handed on to his father, who was a charter member of the Morgantown pool. Since his father's death several years ago, Sutton has been running the operation on his own.

"With the information provided by the calf pool, you can determine which calves are good," he says. "We never really had any way to compare them before. Some of the cows you think are OK might not be OK, so I especially like the BRS program because it can give us a history on commercial cattle. The people in charge of the program are also good because if we miss some information, they will contact us to make sure everything is complete."

He adds, "It is too early to tell too much about the information the BRS has provided, but if it indicates a change should be made, all of our breeders will no doubt pay attention."



Phillip Osborne (right), director of the Morgantown calf pool, says data and feedback have helped breeders improve their cattle. Since using carcass EPDs and having his replacement heifers scanned by ultrasound for the last two years, Robert Straight (left) has made some changes in his breeding program.