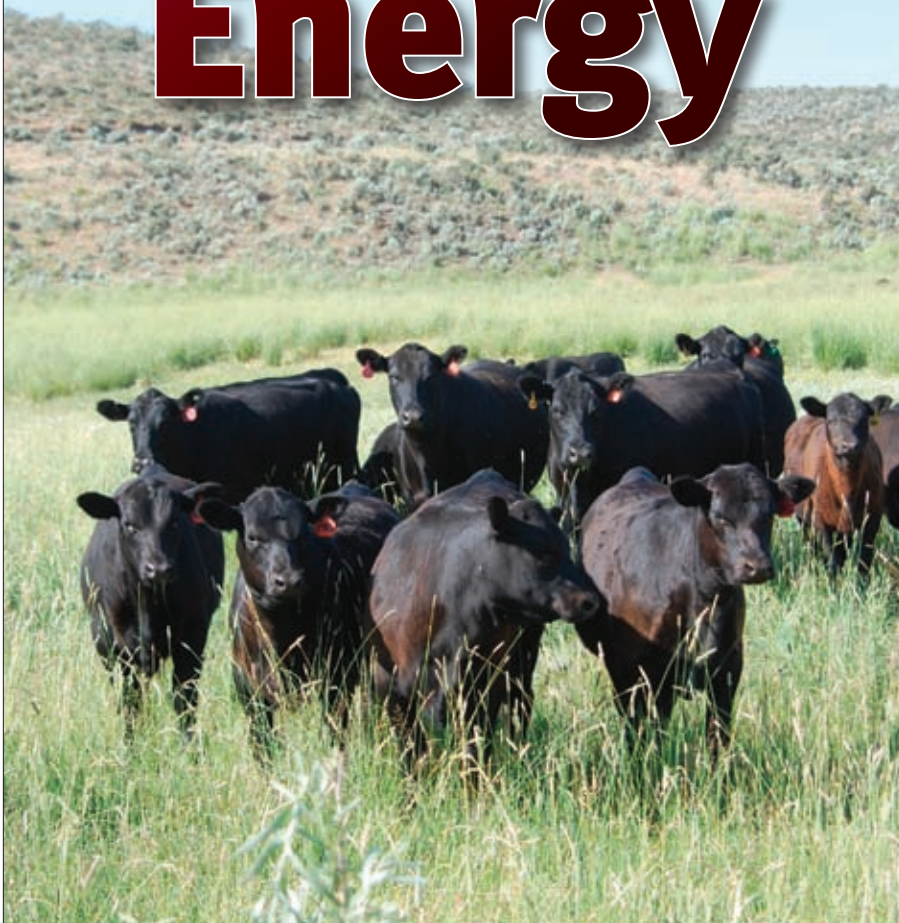


Positive Energy



It takes a certain kind to thrive on the sagebrush ranges along the Idaho-Oregon border.

Story & photos by Steve Suther

Out where the few public roads are named for dry creeks and gulches, and drought is more common than rain, Angus producers face difficult choices. Cows or carcass isn't one of them, if they use the genetic tools available.

Doug and Janice Burgess developed their herd during the last 40 years to thrive in the high-desert range north of Jordan Valley, Ore. The first time they got a look at carcass data from their calves, in 2008, the 55 heifers went 60% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) and USDA Prime.

That was seven years after they moved to an oasis of a place near Homedale, Idaho, 40

miles northeast of their summer ranch and gateway to public leases.

"We needed more of a hay base, and a better place to grow our calves with protection in the winter," Janice says. The lower elevation and rented cornstalks were welcome winter changes for the cows, too.

A few of the older bossies seem to know where the long trail ends each November as Burgess friends and family take three days to herd them all the way back from the sagebrush range. Of course, they can't recall those bitter seasons when they "made do" out there, but their owners remember it well.

"That environment sure reminds us to

adapt the cows, or they won't breed back," Doug says. "We were glad when the [American Angus] Association came out with the dollar value index (\$Values) tools, especially the cow energy value (\$EN), because it helps us keep track of our progress."

Two herds

The couple expanded from their commercial Angus base to add purebreds in the 1990s and hosted their first production bull sale in 2008, featuring 75 registered bulls from yearlings to 2-year-olds. But their philosophy will always stay rooted on the commercial side that represents two-thirds of their 450 cows.

"We run both herds as similar as we can, though we don't put the purebreds in the leased range with the multiple sires in there," Doug says. "But they're handled the same, and selected for a medium frame with as much marbling and performance as we can get in them."

That brings up \$EN again.

"This country can be real short on water, which is kind of important for milk," he says, noting the 8 to 10 inches (in.) of annual precipitation never comes at more than half an inch at a time. "We try to keep positive energy in the cows and look for that in bulls, too." A higher number means more dollars saved in feed cost per year, compared to an animal with a lower or negative \$EN.

As a happy coincidence, research shows a slightly favorable correlation between selection for marbling and \$EN. The most efficient cows tend to be smaller in weight, stature and milk production, according to a 2007 report by Twig Marston, University of Nebraska animal scientist. "We'd expect marbling to be favored in these smaller cows, because the traits have a slightly negative correlation," he said. (To view the report visit www.cabpartners.com/news/research/marston_marblingandothertraits.pdf)

Cows feature a foundation based on artificial insemination (AI), but natural service is the mainstay now. Careful bull selection for balance, beef value (\$B) and local adaptation have paid off.

"Last year, we added a couple of bulls that were in the top 6% to 7% of the breed for feed efficiency, too, because they happened to have everything else we wanted," Doug says.

"There are some numbers we will compromise on," Janice adds. "But if you find that you are getting too high on some number or low on another, and you don't really like his looks, you better look at a different bull to buy."

Cattle have to fit their owner's needs as well as the consumer's, Doug says. "If

► **Above:** Doug and Janice Burgess developed their herd during the last 40 years to thrive in the high-desert range north of Jordan Valley, Ore.

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somebody has a good job in town, their decisions will be different than ours. If you depend on your cows for your income, you don't have the option of making a mistake. That limits your selection."

The Burgesses manage six groups within their herd, including a set of 100 commercial cows that join a communal herd of more than 1,000 head in a 20,000-acre, mile-high plateau each summer.

"Our cows are pretty much on their own out here," Janice says. "They're sure-footed and get around good on lava flow and shale rock. At least they don't have to worry about heat stress; when it does get hot, calves can get under the sage and keep cool."

Calves are weaned from August to mid-

September weighing around 600 pounds (lb.), and trucked to Homedale for backgrounding. They get booster vaccinations that follow the branding shots, a four-way respiratory antiviral and eight-way blackleg. All calves are tested for bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) as well, though they have never shown a positive.

Identifying value with AngusSource®

Breeding stock are developed in the ranch pens, but commercial calves are generally sold via Superior Livestock video auction bearing AngusSource® tags since they became available in 2005.


"We really believe in AngusSource," Janice says, noting their standing offer to buy the

program tags for any bull customer. She tends to be the technology leader of the two, surfing the web for advice and joining in producer discussions across the country on everything from management and breeding to camera monitoring for their February-calving heifers.

AngusSource has helped underscore the value of Burgess cattle, as they have topped the program's regional Premium Value Challenge. Moreover, their 2007 feeding heifers caught the eye of Nebraska feeder Terry Beller, manager of the CAB-licensed Beller Feedlots, near Lindsay, Neb. He and a partner bought and fed them as part of a pen that placed third in the nationwide AngusSource Carcass Challenge (ASCC) in

2008. Beller shared data with the source ranch, as he often does.

“We need to learn more about retaining ownership before we jump into it,” Doug says. “We appreciate Terry’s cooperation in that, because that’s the only way we can make them better.”

From the always-improving cows to the information-hungry owners of Burgess Angus Ranch, positive energy keeps flowing even when water is in short supply. 

► **Right:** “That environment sure reminds us to adapt the cows, or they won’t breed back,” Doug Burgess says. “We were glad when the [American Angus] Association came out with the dollar value index (SValues) tools, especially the cow energy value (\$EN), because it helps us keep track of our progress.”

