



# Test for the Best, Cull the Rest

## Kansas commercial Angus herd first to use GeneMax.®

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

**K**evin Wellnitz and daughter Jennifer are of one mind when it comes to a vision for their 200-cow Plum Creek Ranch Angus herd, near Neosho Rapids, Kan. That was clear when she came back to the farm and drew some of her pay in replacement heifers. Kevin felt both loss and fatherly pride as she picked the best.

As herd managers, they want to keep only the best, and make selection calls as soon as possible. That helps explain why they were the first to use the GeneMax® DNA test when it was made available by Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) in February for blood or at least 20 hair root follicles per animal.

“We pulled hair on some more today,” Jennifer said during an April visit. “On the first 23 head, we just tried to represent some from each sire group.”

“We wanted to see if there was any correlation between the sire groups and the results,” Kevin continued.

Did they find that connection?

“Not in the sires, but we looked at the dam’s sires, and we think it helped determine some of the oddballs,” Jennifer says. “When the DNA test results made us wonder on some of them, digging deeper helped explain some of that.”

► **Above:** “Our hope with the GeneMax test is that we can eliminate the outliers at [the yearling heifer] stage rather than four years from now when they’ve got a couple of calves on the rail or in our herd,” Kevin Wellnitz says.

► **Right:** Eye appeal is included in the primary selection criteria. But even pretty cattle must produce high-value beef, so the Plum Creek Ranch heifers are backed by records and now DNA tests.

Having fed at CAB partner feedlots and U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) member yards, Plum Creek has carcass data, some showing better than 50% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and Prime. Those individual records can be brought to bear on some cows going back five years, but it is hard to find clear correlations, she says.

“We evaluate our carcass results every year, and if there are some lines that are not performing, we may cull the cows, and potentially the bulls,” Jennifer says. “But there are some gray areas because the cows are bred to different bulls with different results.”

Looking at a pen of replacements scheduled for artificial insemination (AI) in June, Kevin puts it in perspective.

“Our hope with the GeneMax test is that

we can eliminate the outliers at this stage rather than four years from now when they’ve got a couple of calves on the rail or in our herd,” he says. “That’s when you hate to realize that, whoa, she’s not doing what we want.”

Eye appeal is included in the primary selection criteria.

“Everybody likes to save the nicest-looking ones,” Kevin says. “It’s always more fun to look at pretty cattle, but ultimately they have to hang up a high-value carcass. We raise enough replacements that we can have everybody on the same page with their records, looks and DNA tests for carcass quality.”

### Quality target

Kevin grew up in the Neosho valley and



started using Angus bulls on heifers for calving ease while crossbreeding everything else. “We had a lot of good calves, a lot of that hybrid vigor in the 1980s. Some of the crossbreds got so big that my 1,200-pound (lb.) cows were weighing 1,500 pounds. In the ’90s I went to all-Angus. I decided I wanted more...”

“Consistency,” Jennifer puts in.

“Quality,” Kevin continues. “My original plan was to get some consistency in the cattle and then go back to crossbreeding. The further I got into it, the more value I saw, the more I see in high-quality beef.

“So I kind of changed directions, and that’s what I want to grow; I don’t sell calves off the cow, so Prime is our ultimate target,” he says. “There’s no more expense in that than raising commodity cattle — well, maybe a little more invested in your bulls.”

Plum Creek uses mainly Green Garden Angus bulls, following AI to sires from the same registered operation. It’s part of the strategy to achieve consistency. They’ll keep the pressure on marbling but stay moderate in growth so as to maintain efficient cows for their management-intensive grazing and crop rotation farm.

To flush for AI, the spring heifers graze ryegrass that was relay-cropped in after soybeans. “Then we synch them up,” Kevin says, noting better than 70% showing heat in

► Jennifer Wellnitz looks forward to receiving the USPB carcass data this summer from steer mates and a few cull heifers fed at Tiffany Cattle Co., Herington, Kan.



last years’ heifers. An equal size group of fall replacement heifers will take the GeneMax test, too, as the herd moves from a 60:40 ratio favoring the spring to an evenly divided future.

More than 30 cull heifers are finished at home without implants and harvested for a growing freezer beef market as Plum Creek Beef, processed at several local lockers. Lacking official graders, “the only thing you know at the locker is what you see,” Kevin says. “That’s one more reason we want to be sure all our cattle are hitting the target.”

At that local level or on the national scale, he says, “We ask people to pay a lot for beef. We should have consistent quality in the product; that’s our biggest problem in the industry.”

DNA testing can be part of the solution.

“If we can like the results we’re getting with GeneMax and gain confidence in what it can do for us, we will pull blood or hair samples before our spring calves go to summer grass, so I will have all the information when they come back in,” he says.

Looking around at uniform and increasingly predictable black cattle grazing the ryegrass where occasional nursery clusters of calves nap in the sun, father and daughter feel that growing confidence.

“I hope we are on the right track, anyway,” Kevin says. “Because if we’re wrong, we’re way wrong.”

Jennifer looks forward to receiving the USPB carcass data this summer from steer mates and a few cull heifers fed at Tiffany Cattle Co., Herington, Kan.

Self-deprecating humor aside, continual testing, feeding, measuring and course corrections leave little room to stray off the right way.



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