

Systematically Better Beef



PHOTO COURTESY OF USPB

Kansas rancher says testing and managing environment help handle variance in cattle genetics.

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

New ideas and technology find their way into the various CB Farms enterprises south of Preston, Kan., only after a systematic and logical trial. Berry and Carla Bortz own the extensive but integrated business with daughter Amber and son Darnall, away at college, and as active partners with their oldest son, Brandon, and his wife, Cari.

The farm began in 1982 with cattle backgrounding and finishing, but they added a cow herd in 2001.

“We couldn’t compete with the big feedyards buying light calves, so we started buying cows,” Berry Bortz recalls. “In hindsight, we put them together way too fast. It was a colorful herd.”

Soon after, a leasing opportunity came up that included 25 registered-Angus cows, enough to prove their way to become 150 and spread influence across the larger commercial herd that is now 90% straight Angus with a few black baldies and two grays.

Cows only stay around because they work for every segment of the beef industry, as

measured by feedback from U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) harvest reports.

“We have been culling cows that produce two out of three Select calves,” Bortz says. “To step that up, we would have to cull for low-Choice, and I don’t know if we can do that at today’s heifer prices.”

Meanwhile, he’s looking at DNA technology to help keep the best heifers from an already well-tuned herd. Earlier this year, CB Farms participated in a trial using GeneMax™ (GMX) Focus, the genomics test from Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) that indexes high-percentage-Angus cattle for gain and grade potential. The higher the GMX Score the more potential, statistically speaking, although some individual results won’t fit overall trends.

At CB Farms, 80% of steers and heifers tested were in the top 20th percentile of GMX Scores, and most were in the 90s, with the other one-fifth of the cattle distributed across the other 80% of scores. Individual photos were taken of several steers this spring as they neared harvest in April, but those only prove visual appraisal can’t tell much.

Outliers stand out, so Bortz couldn’t help but notice the only Select steer among the

first 75 sold was a GMX 99, while the top Prime steer was a 95. The sire-matching aspect of the test showed the same sires produced progeny scoring very high and below average on GMX, but none of that is surprising to the south-central Kansas producer.

“Environment has a lot to do with the end result,” Bortz says. “You will always have variance in cattle genetics. Just like a

► Bortz uses GeneMax Focus DNA testing to determine which replacement heifers to keep.



► **Above:** Whenever possible, Berry and Carla Bortz, CB Farms, Preston, Kan., buy calves from their registered-Angus bull customers to feed.

calving-ease bull may have 10,000 calves, but then every once in a while you still get a 100-pound calf out of him.”

USPB data builds confidence in marketing, he adds, noting the 0.58-inch (in.) backfat on the one Select steer indicates it was marketed at the right time. The four Primes included a Yield Grade (YG) 2 and three YG 3s. Overall, the pen achieved 79% CAB or Prime, and only four head did not earn a premium.

At those grading levels, Bortz says, there’s no need for GMX tests on steers. “We think we’ll do some more of that (testing with GMX), but on the replacement heifers,” he explains.

Data make decisions

Whenever possible, the farm feeds known genetics. That includes progeny from their registered-Angus bull customers through a calf buy-back program. When they just need to fill a pen, Bortz will turn to crossbred calves, considered more likely to gain quickly and perhaps make up for their earning fewer quality premiums.

CB Farms set up each enterprise for its integrated role, always beginning with the end in mind. Within the beef cattle herds, females culled from the registered herd often get a chance to make it as commercials with changed ear-tag numbers, but neither they nor future progeny can return to the registered herd. That purebred influence has helped increase carcass value, but much credit goes to the efficiency of pushing the February- and March-born calf-feds to hit the seasonal April highs.

Bortz knows that’s not the best time for quality-grid premiums, but it’s still one of the best targets because of the historically strong base price then. His systematic approach keeps track of alternatives and why opportunities appear for higher premiums in the fall.

“There are not many fall herds from

here north, but a lot from here south,” he says. “Most of them have some Brahman influence, and they are not going to do as well hitting premium targets. So, if we were 100 miles further south, we’d take a look at running the pairs on wheat pasture and the dry cows on grass, but that won’t work here.”

What is working in northeastern Pratt County is efficient quality regardless of drought.

“We’ve seen the carcass data over the last five years, and I know that we’ve gotten better at what we do,” Bortz allows. “We’re not great, but we made progress.”

He cannot easily compare growth

progress using the usual feedlot performance parameters.

“It’s hard to check gains or conversion when we sort pens 14 times. Any time I can get 35 or 40 head from whatever pen, I ship cattle,” Bortz says. “But we do track live days. Two years ago, we got that down to 394 days but lost 30 days last year delaying the start on high-priced corn and then bad weather in February. Our goal is harvest by 365 days and the drought-forced early weaning has moved us closer.”

AJ

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

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