

EVEN BETTER

Balance and longevity discussed at Angus Convention

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

The Angus cow is already the hero in the breed's success story, but is it possible to make her even better?

Cattlemen have been doing that work for decades, but with more precise tools, Kelli Retallick-Riley, president of Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI), predicts they could make faster progress in decoupling age-old antagonisms. She spoke at the Genetics Symposium, sponsored by NEOGEN, hosted during the 2021 National Angus Convention and Trade Show in Fort Worth, Texas.

"We ask a lot of an Angus cow," Retallick-Riley said.

She must wean off a heavy calf, who hangs well on the rail. She must breed back, using fewer resources, and keep a good attitude while doing it.

"And we've asked her to be as beautiful in her work as she is productive," Retallick-Riley added.

From phenotype collection to participation in programs like MaternalPlus®, members have been working for years to characterize the Angus cow.

Weaned Calf Value (\$W) was the first maternal index, focusing on birth weight (BW), weaning weight (WW), maternal milk (Milk) and mature weight (MW). When it was created, traits like docility (DOC) and calving ease direct (CED) were fairly new measures, and others like foot scoring and heifer pregnancy (HP) didn't exist. Progress was still closely



Kelli Retallick-Riley (from left) spoke with Adam Sawyer, Bassett, Neb.; Scott Pohlman, Hereford, Texas; and Gordon Stucky, Kingman, Kan., about how they utilize genetic tools to create cattle that work for commercial operations in their area.

related to weaning weight because of the limited traits available, Retallick-Riley explained.

"In 2019 we were able to release something that was a bit more robust for all of us to use," she said, referencing Maternal Weaned Calf Value (\$M) index.

The \$M index draws on CED, calving ease maternal (CEM), WW, Milk, HP, DOC, MW and foot score expected progeny differences (EPDs) — both foot angle (Angle) and claw set (Claw).

"Instead of increasing mature body size, we're now starting to put downward pressure on mature cow size, and we're doing it while

weaning off the same size calf," Retallick-Riley said.

Years ago, cattlemen thought it was crazy to say birth weight trends could go down while weaning weights improved.

"You have broken that genetic antagonism," she said. "I want to challenge you to think through that. Maybe we can break that antagonism of maternal cow size and performance weaning weight in the next 10 years."

MaternalPlus and whole herd inventory reporting have added more data, and with that the tools improve.

Still, there's been a missing link.

"How long are these cows going to

stay in the herd, consistently get bred and continue to wean off a calf every year?” she asked.

Some call it longevity or stayability, others refer to it as sustained cow fertility, but it’s all centered around helping breeders create more maternal efficiency, Retallick-Riley said. When \$M was introduced, these improvements were already on the drawing board.

“One of the things about research is the fact that if the data is messy, it’s going to take a whole lot longer,” Retallick-Riley noted. “When we think of something like disposal codes and traits like why cows are leaving the herd, this data set is large. It’s enormous and it’s messy.”

The research is ongoing, and as modeling stands up to testing, AGI is working toward a research tool in this area, perhaps available as early as this summer. \$M updates will follow.

In the meantime, breeders can continue to collect the data through whole herd reporting, she said.

“Basically you have to tell the database, the genetic evaluation, what’s happening to your females every year,” Retallick-Riley said. “It will take a collaborative approach.”

However, having the available tools is only part of the equation, she said, because “balance is in the eye of the beholder.”

Cattlemen must use the tools to create genetics that work for commercial cattlemen in their area, Retallick-Riley explained as she invited three breeders to the stage to discuss their breeding strategies: Adam Sawyer, Bassett, Neb.; Scott Pohlman, Hereford, Texas; and Gordon Stucky, Kingman, Kan.

“I think sometimes, you know, it’s



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pretty easy for us as cattlemen to get excited about the latest, greatest, top-selling herd sire that has the top 1% from a performance perspective,” Pohlman said. “Sometimes it’s good to take a step back and say, ‘Okay, will my customer be able to fully realize that genetic potential in his environment?’”

Foundational traits and postweaning performance and carcass quality are all important, but in their large Texas Panhandle, short grass, prone-to-drought pastures, having a little extra fleshing ability is not just a nicety, it’s a necessity.

All panelists emphasized the importance of knowing the target audience and what they need.

“Let your customers educate you; don’t try to educate them,” Sawyer said.

When genomics brought an opportunity to make better decisions quicker, they took advantage.

“I think the genomic-enhanced EPDs have really given us a clear road path, finding the bulls, the females that have no holes in them,” he noted.

About 90% of Sawyer’s Sandhills Nebraska customers make their living solely off cows, so he is breeding bulls that will both create females and feeder calves. He feels the weight of getting it right for them.

“The opportunity to reduce the variability from that mating decision




is paramount,” Pohlman added.

That’s especially powerful when paired with phenotypic data collection. Stucky was an early adopter of MaternalPlus, and collected udder scores for decades before that.

“Our opinion has always been everyone has the access to the same AI [artificial insemination] sires or the ability to buy certain bulls. The cow herd makes the difference,” Stucky said. “If we can put together data and define our cow herd for what our particular goals are and move forward with that, that will define who we are as breeders and as a result what customers will come and purchase from you.”

Getting that definition right requires the ability to describe the females with more than words.

“Everybody’s direction can be different, but you just have to have the tools to be able to sort,” Stucky said. 

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