

*“We can’t do what we’re doing without  
extremely high-quality Angus.”*

*— Ken Griner*



# Warming Up To Angus

## Angus bulls find a home in the Sunshine State.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

**T**ourists aren't the only ones flocking to Florida. The market has spoken. As a result, more Florida ranchers are putting Angus bulls to work.

"Angus are known for marbling," says Ken Griner of Chiefland, Fla. "They are the backbone of what we do in terms of building a product people want to come back to."

He adds, "Several years ago, we decided we either needed to produce commodity beef as cheaply as we could or do the best job we can and own them until harvest. That's driven where we are today."

For years, Griner, wife Lynetta and son Korey fed cattle at Pratt Feeders in Kansas. Since 2015, however, the Angus-influenced feeder calves from their Usher Land and Timber have been fed and harvested in Florida under the Florida Cattle Ranchers (FCR) label.

Gene Lollis also depends on Angus bulls. "It is the marketability of the Angus-sired calf," he states.

Lollis, manager of Buck Island Ranch of Lake Placid, uses 50-60 Angus bulls in a three-breed rotation with Hereford and Brahman. He finishes and markets at least

part of the ranch's calves through FCR and sells the remainder as feeders.

### Sourcing bulls

As you can imagine, it takes a special bull to make it in Florida's heat and humidity. The lower-quality, warm-season perennials that cover the state don't do hard-working bulls any favors, either. As a result, both Griner and Lollis put a great deal of time into selecting Angus bulls that work on their operations, then follow with management practices to make life a bit more tolerable for the black-hided bulls.

For starters, Lollis tries to source Angus bulls out of the Southeast or Texas. University of Missouri animal scientist Jared Decker agrees with the approach.

"Look for animals bred or selected in a similar environment to your own," Decker advises. "Select a seedstock breeder who has similar heat, humidity, forage base and similar management to yours."

### Indicator traits

Lollis gets more specific when it comes to traits.

"For maternal EPDs (expected progeny differences), we want a scrotal circumference of no less than 34 cm. We don't need a lot of milk, 15 to 25 pounds (lb.)."

When a Kansas seedstock breeder toured the ranch, he told Lollis he needed more milk, Lollis shares. "I told him this environment limits milk."

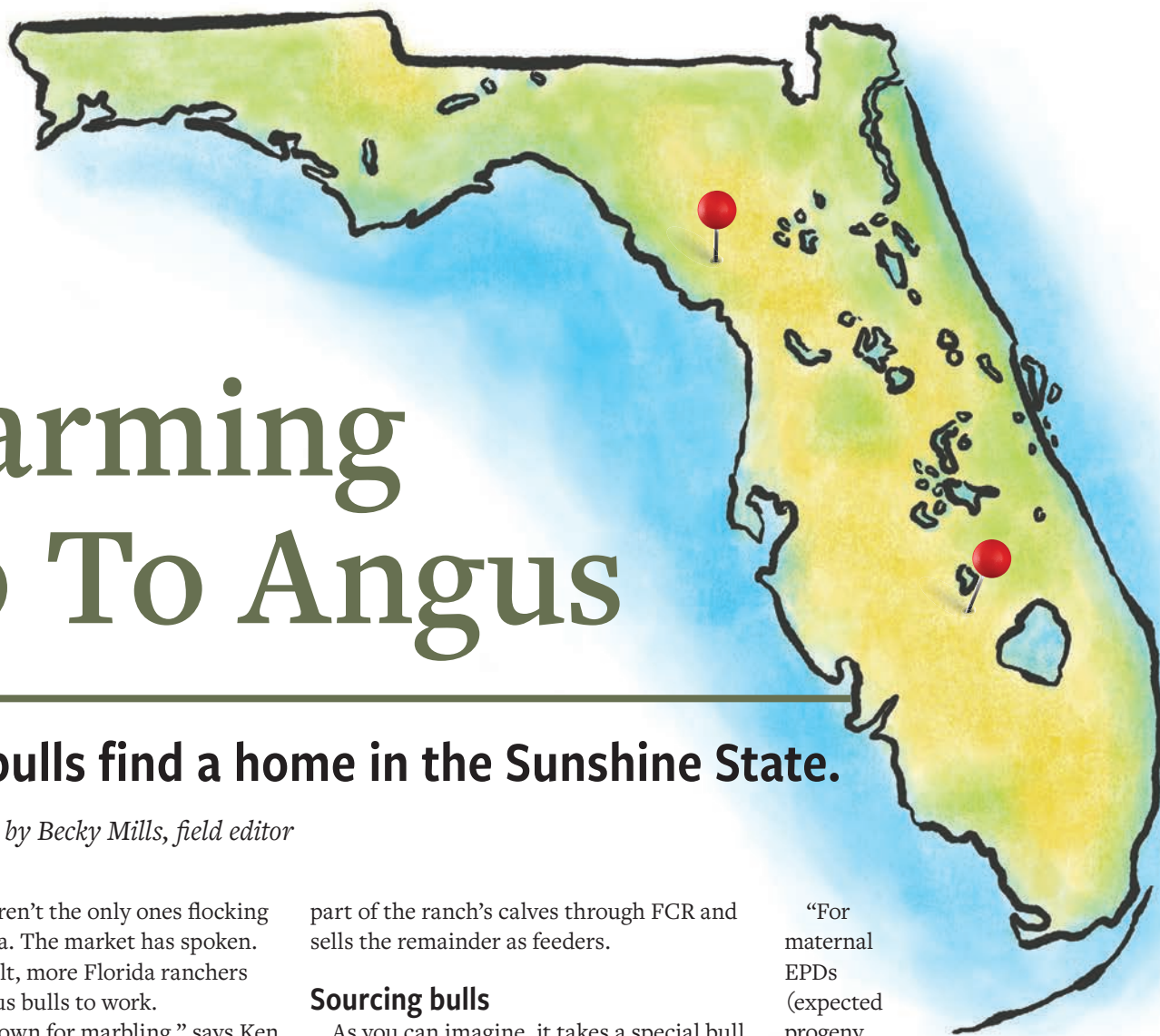
Since he keeps his own replacement heifers, he stays away from bulls that are off the charts on carcass traits.

"They get too big in this environment," he explains. "The cows get to 1,350 to 1,400 pounds. We want our maternal bulls more moderate in all traits. Those females mature at 1,150 to 1,200 pounds."

Along with studying EPDs, Lollis looks at the bulls.

"He can have the best genetics in the world, but if he can't come down here and travel, he ain't going to breed cows," he emphasizes. "He's got to be structurally

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sound with a good set of feet and legs.”

Lollis also counts on Angus bulls for calving ease. He breeds yearling, 2-year-old heifers and, at times, even 3-year-olds to Angus. The rest of the Angus bulls breed the heavier-percentage-Brahman females as part of his three-breed rotation.

“South Florida, south of Highway 50, is a totally different environment than anywhere else in the continental U.S.,” says Lollis. “It is a tropical environment and tough on purebred English and exotic breeds. We have to have Brahman in the mama cows for longevity and heat and pest tolerance.”

### Time to adjust

Buck Island has a split breeding and calving season to help supply FCR with

cattle year-round, but Lollis also uses it to give bulls extra time to adapt to their environment.

“We buy Angus bulls at 15 to 18 months and try to buy them in the spring before it gets too hot, so they can get somewhat acclimated,” he says.

He usually holds the yearling bulls over and puts them out in the November-February breeding season and supplements them in the meantime. He’ll then keep a close eye on them during the 120-day breeding seasons.

“It is tough on Angus bulls. With incoming bulls, you better be prepared to pull them out after 70 to 80 days, depending on how long they’ve been here,” he cautions. “If not, you’ll spend a year reconditioning them.”

### Broader range

Griner uses Angus bulls for cleanup duty, starting in January after the heifers are bred by artificial insemination (AI).

Along with the quality factor, he says, “Angus gives us a dependable animal to breed to heifers. We have to have Brahman in our cows, but the heterosis gives them a pop on birth weights. It can be an issue if you don’t pay attention.”

Like Lollis, he buys yearling bulls.

However, he doesn’t limit his purchases to the Southeast.

“We contract with Galen Fink on bulls. We build relationships,” he says. “He has learned our business and helps us along the way. He eliminates the opportunity for me to make mistakes.”

### Shed the coat

Griner, who normally uses Angus bulls as a terminal cross on his Charolais-cross heifers and cows, looks for a moderate-frame bull for his central-Florida environment.

“We pay attention to hair,” he says. “We don’t want a bull or cow family known for a heavy hair coat.”

Missouri’s Decker agrees, and says the American Angus Association made a good move by introducing a hair shed (HS) EPD, which his team helped develop. The EPD analyzes hair shedding with a 1-to-5 scoring system. A 1 represents an animal that is 100% shed off by the start of summer, while a 5 still has its winter coat going into summer.

“In the Southeast, the hair shed EPD can identify bulls that are genetically responsive to day length and their environment,” Decker says. “Their daughters are better predisposed to work in the heat and humidity.”

Along with a moderate frame and slick hair coat, Griner emphasizes carcass-quality EPDs.

“We depend on Angus for marbling, tenderness and quality,” he says. “We’re not going to buy an Angus bull that’s average in those traits, but we can be competing with seedstock breeders for those kinds of bulls.”

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Gene Lollis, manager of Buck Island Ranch of Lake Placid, uses Angus bulls because of the marketability of Angus-influenced calves.



Chiefland, Fla., rancher Ken Griner uses Angus bulls to help create a product consumers demand.



Above: Ken Griner has a trained work force in Boots and Spurs (not pictured) at Usher Land and Timber.

## A little TLC

To keep the young bulls in a body condition score (BCS) of 5.5 to 6.0, Griner supplements them with grain.

“A young bull is like a heifer. You have to take care of them, at least until they’re 2, or you can’t expect them to grow,” he says, though noting that he depends on grazing for most of their needs. “I don’t want them to learn to hunt a feed bucket.”

Also, like Lollis, he watches them carefully during his 90-day breeding season, and he will rotate bulls out if they lose too much weight.

Decker says after the pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP) score, which identifies animals that can handle high elevations, and

the HS EPD, there are limited tools to help select bulls for harsh environments. However, he says with careful management, they can adapt.

“In talking to producers who import bulls to harsh environments, they say one-third do really well, one-third do OK, and one-third drop completely off and lose several body condition scores,” Decker says. “However, if you are able to supplement these cattle for a year or two, they’ll probably acclimate.”

Even with the extra management, Lollis and Griner agree it is worth it to use Angus bulls. A pen of 55 Buck Island Ranch cattle, mostly heifers, were Florida-fed and marketed under the FCR label. They graded

4% Prime, 91% Choice and 5% Select.

While their yield grades were higher than he wanted, Lollis says, “We don’t always have a home for them. Sometimes we have to feed them a little longer.”

He adds, “It takes good bulls on these crossbred cows. Angus sure helps put that carcass value in there consistently.”

In Griner’s case, a pen off his ranch and marketed through FCR recently graded 94% Choice.

“We can’t do what we’re doing without extremely high-quality Angus,” he concludes. **ABB**

Editor’s note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.

## Florida Cattle Ranchers: Home-grown beef raised right

In 2015, 13 Florida ranchers sat down to figure out how to give Florida consumers what they wanted. The list included locally produced cattle, raised humanely and sustainably. The pieces were already there. Florida is home to almost 900,000 head of mama cows and feeding and harvest facilities existed in state. Their answer was Florida Cattle Ranchers (FCR).

Those ranchers each pledged to send 500 head of feeder cattle a year to the program. The first year, 12,000 head were fed, processed and found their way to consumers.

The road has been anything but smooth.

“We’re just 13 cowboys that don’t know a damn thing about running a meat company,” says Chiefland, Fla., rancher Ken Griner. “We’ve had to learn as we go. That’s been painful.”

However, he says, “The meat sells, and people love it.”

Probably the biggest rut in the road was COVID. Without the volume needed to supply chain groceries, most of FCR beef goes to restaurants. When restaurants shut down, some for good, that left FCR without its major markets.

Don Quincey, who feeds the FCR cattle in his Chiefland facility, bought meat trucks and started peddling the meat on street corners.

Ditto for Lake Placid rancher Gene Lollis, who converted the RV he and his wife, Terrie, bought for vacations to a meat truck.

The picture is now a little brighter. In 2022, FCR was back up to around 6,500 head of Florida-born, -raised and -fed cattle. That equates to around 5.2 million pounds (lb.) of hanging beef, grading at least 80% Choice.

FCR also has the sustainability and environmental goals covered. Buck Island Ranch is owned by Archbold Expeditions Inc., a nonprofit scientific organization. Researchers there are collecting data and information, including costs, energy and the effects of the cattle production systems on the environment.

While it isn’t part of his duties at Buck Island, Lollis still spends his weekends selling FCR beef at RV parks, farmer’s markets and parking lots. For him, it goes beyond marketing a product.

“I represent all cattle ranchers,” he says. “My goals are to offer a good-quality product and share our story. There is no better way to have contact with consumers than go out with them. If you don’t tell your story, somebody else will.”

He adds, “I want to give back to the industry that gave me my life.”

