

# A Tale as Old as Time

*Angus breeders utilizing whole-herd reporting and MaternalPlus® are helping to propel the breed by influencing seedstock and commercial operations.*

*by Megan Silveira*

As the sun rises, peeking up over the horizon stretching the entire length of the pasture, the rancher heads out, pen and pencil in hand. Surveying the land, he quickly counts the number of calves on the ground, eager to add new data to his collection.

This rancher is unique. While he shares the same passion for cattle his elders do, this rancher is only 9 years old. While he works just as

hard as his fellow cattlemen, his herd is only 10 strong instead of 1,000.

The importance of record keeping is recognized by even the youngest of agriculturalists, as cattle breeders like the young man above are required to keep record books through both the 4-H and FFA organizations.

While record books have morphed into the process of whole-herd reporting for Angus breeders, both hold the same amount of value, no matter a cattleman's age.

“Whole-herd reporting is the concept of providing a status on every cow in the herd every year,” says

Dan Moser, president of Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI).

Moser says the process of whole-herd data collection, while slightly more time-consuming, has benefits capable of stretching across the entire industry. Angus breeders gather data on all active females in their herd for the year and submit the information to the American Angus Association.

## Seedstock standards

It is no surprise the beef industry is divided into two segments: seedstock and commercial producers. Both are vital, but when it comes to evolving the industry, Moser says seedstock producers rely heavily on their record-keeping abilities.

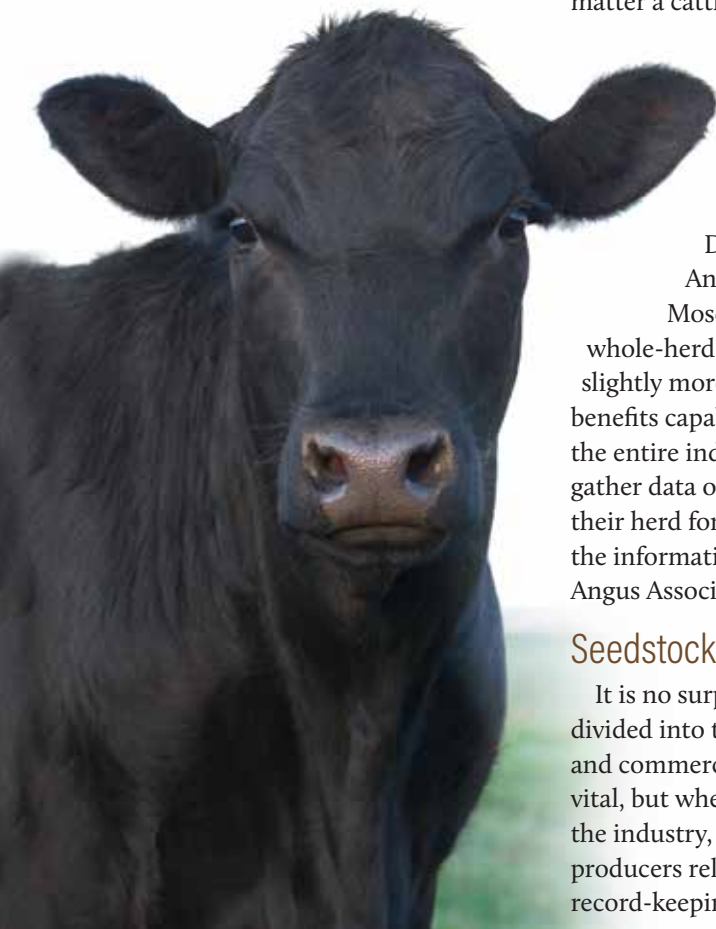
“It really is, in my mind, an obligation for a seedstock producer to describe their cattle as fully, completely and accurately as they can,” Moser says.

While Moser says data collection is extremely variable amongst commercial operations, seedstock producers typically share similar goals that make data important. Most seedstock operations are dedicated to producing bulls for commercial customers, Moser explains.

Through the purchase of bulls from seedstock operations, Moser says commercial producers depend on their counterparts to provide genetic change and improvement. Moser sees the beef industry as a chain, where seedstock operations produce bulls then purchased by commercial operations with the ability to improve the entire commercial herd.

“Commercial producers are really dependent on the seedstock industry to provide genetic change and improvement,” Moser says. Decisions on bull acquisition are based on genetic information and bring about progress in all operations.

Moser says there is value in investing in whole-herd reporting as it can bring success on an industry-wide level. By taking time to record information on all cattle in their herds, ranchers are committing themselves to helping their customers find success in the long run.





Stephen Miller, AGI genetic research director, says to reap the full benefits of expected progeny differences (EPDs) and genetic tools, ranchers cannot leave any blanks in the information they provide.

“Whole-herd reporting is about recording everything about everybody,” he explains. “The EPDs we put out are only as good as the data breeders send in.”

Miller says a past survey found Angus breeders throughout the Association rank cow longevity as the most important trait in breeding females. Angus, however, is the only major breed association currently lacking an EPD for this trait.

Miller describes whole-herd data as “the gold standard” in developing a longevity EPD. With the information provided by ranchers on all their cattle, AGI is taking steps to creating this EPD for breeders.

Miller says whole-herd reporting is dedicated to compiling and analyzing long-term data, and that has already paid off for the Angus industry. Through data collection and genetic tools, Miller says an EPD for foot structure was developed.

Miller urges ranchers to submit all forms of data to the Association so animals can be identified correctly. He believes ranchers should even go beyond collecting just birth and weaning weights.

Mature cow weights are a form of data collection Miller says many breeders neglect. He says ranchers are not always in “data collection mode,” but emphasizing the importance of whole-herd reporting can easily change this.

Miller explains how the Association is limited in what it can do for ranchers based on the amount of data available. Whole-herd reporting is about getting the

complete picture, Miller says. The more genetic information the Association has, the more it is able to help breeders make informed decisions for their herd.

“An animal’s value in the marketplace and in a commercial operation depends on accurate and complete data collection,” Moser says.

## Helping hands

“Whole-herd reporting is much more simple than people think,” says Kelli Retallick, AGI genetic service director. “Whole-herd reporting shouldn’t be an intimidating concept to our producers.”

In fact, Retallick says most ranchers are already collecting the data required for whole-herd reporting. With the use of MaternalPlus, the Association’s whole-herd reporting inventory-based system, ranchers can provide the Association with data necessary to make genetic progress.

MaternalPlus is a program under the umbrella of Angus Herd Improvement Records® (AHIR®), a herd performance program most Angus breeders are already familiar. Retallick says whole-herd reporting with the Association only requires two additional steps compared to AHIR.

Under the MaternalPlus program, Retallick explains ranchers will track their herds on a per-cow basis rather than by per-calf. Operations will annually enroll their herds and prepay \$3 per active female in their operation for the year, but submit performance data on calves at no charge.

As the year progresses, ranchers

will continue to provide the birth and weaning weights of calves produced, a process Retallick says is not unique to whole-herd reporting. With MaternalPlus, however, Retallick says producers will also need to report information on cows without a calf at side.

She explains MaternalPlus requires ranchers to identify if a cow was open or if she lost the calf at birth. While this extra step does add a small amount of time to the overall data collection process, Retallick says the benefits of whole-herd reporting are worth the extra effort.

Retallick says one of the key elements of whole-herd reporting, often neglected by breeders, is to select culling codes for each female removed from the herd. She explains by reporting the reasons cows are culled could allow the Association to find an issue in our own herd books before the problem can spread to commercial operations.

For those unsure about the benefits of whole-herd reporting, Retallick says the MaternalPlus program does not require breeders to go outside their normal realm of data reporting. Advice Retallick gives ranchers is to actually not change the way they are currently collecting data.

In the end, it seems that whole-herd reporting is a tale as old as time for cattle ranchers, both young and old. With a dedication to both gathering and reporting as much data as possible, and with a little help from Association programs like MaternalPlus, producers across the country will help launch the breed into the future and continue to earn the title of the Business Breed. **AJ**

*Editors note: Megan Silveira is a freelance writer from Denair, Calif.*