MEMBERSHIP TIPS

by Jerry Cassady
director of member services

Take the blinders off

I often hear producers referring to EPDs as good numbers or bad numbers, depending on their own bias. In reality, EPDs are simply genetic prediction tools to assist in genetic selection.

Expected progeny differences (EPDs) are the tools necessary to compare animals across different environments to make informed selection decisions. If these genetic predictions meet your personal criteria for your selection goals within your program, then you would refer to them as "good numbers."

The real definition of "good numbers" when describing EPDs are those with high accuracy, reflecting high numbers of data points originating in proper contemporary groups that allow these comparisons. They are "good" not because of their relative value, but because of their reliability. Simply put, high-accuracy numbers can be used with more confidence.

Our database of registered animals suggests the vast majority have birth and weaning weights submitted. However, postweaning data is also important including yearling, carcass and mature traits.

As the leaders in the seedstock industry, we are challenged to continue with comprehensive data collection to best characterize Angus genetics. Accurate weights and measurements with proper contemporary groups provide the cleanest, most accurate, unbiased predictions. This is the level of integrity our customers expect when making their buying decisions.

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The importance of phenotypes

"With the advent of genomic testing, do I still have to collect weights and measurements to fill in my EPD boxes?" This is a common question, and reminds me of putting blinders on a draft horse, only allowing the animal to see a narrow field of vision.

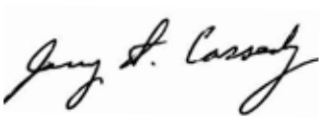
The success of utilizing EPDs as a tool for genetic selection relies on breeder commitment to high-quality data collection and submission. Many industry experts would agree that reporting phenotypic data may be more important now than ever before. The science of genomic testing has brought additional accuracy to our genetic predictions, but we cannot simply rely on these technologies to make our lives easier by eliminating the need for phenotypic data collection and submission.

Using genomics for added EPD accuracy is like using your credit card to pay for items or services. At the end of the month if you fail to pay the credit card bill, what happens to your credit card? The value goes away. The same applies to choosing not to report the actual phenotypes to the database; the value of the gain in accuracy due to genomics goes away. Current genomic tests need vast amounts of data for training so they can be effective as genetic selection tools. By submitting accurate data, you are taking the blinders off and allowing the genomic technology to see the entire picture, thus making better predictions for your next generation.

The hard work associated with the seedstock business often ends at your office desk. Most of our spring-calving programs are well into the current calving season. That means a lot of data to collect, record and submit. Take the time to collect these data points correctly and accurately, to provide unbiased results. It will make a difference in the accuracy of your subsequent EPDs.

In addition, as our bulls and heifers become yearlings, let's continue the due diligence with yearling measurements as well. Yearling data points are equally as crucial to characterize the animal correctly. That means we need to record yearling weights, foot claw and angle scores, ultrasound data, hip height, scrotal circumference, feed intake data and docility scores. The better the data submitted to the American Angus Association, the better the information and resulting EPDs received in return.

Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts when it comes to phenotypic data collection and submission. Breeders should strive to collect high-quality phenotypes and submit them to the American Angus Association genetic evaluation system coupled with genomic information to produce the most accurate EPD and selection index as possible. AJ



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Editor's note: For more information regarding data submission and the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®) program, please contact the American Angus Association Member Services Department at (816) 383-5100 or email jcassady@angus.org.