



COMMON GROUND

by Mark McCully

CEO, American Angus Association

Are EPDs caught in a familiarity trap?

When I walk into a room and flip the switch, the light comes on.

I don't think about it. It just happens.

I am very familiar with electricity, but never consider what needs to happen for that light switch to deliver the result I expect. I even use familiar acronyms like JPEG, HTML, RADAR and LED knowing what they are but rarely giving a thought to what the letters stand for.

If I am not careful, I can find myself in a “familiarity trap.”

That same familiarity sometimes has me accepting or concluding things without much critical thought. In some cases, I believe this same phenomenon can occur with expected progeny differences (EPDs).

Most Angus breeders are highly familiar with EPDs, as they have been around for decades. Some of the criticisms I hear of EPDs are rooted in a place that has forgotten what an EPD is. To start, we must remember EPDs are tools designed for animal breeding and selection, not marketing.

Now, I fully recognize that EPDs have become a significant part of the marketplace. Animals with extreme values for an individual trait or index can bring high dollars. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but we need to remember the value is in the genetic potential of that animal as a parent and not simply a high number. EPDs communicate objective value on breeding cattle, and thus get used frequently to

market an animal's merit — this number is higher than that number, the top 1%, etc. But EPDs aren't built to be marketplace currency. Like any misused tool, disappointment and frustration can follow if we don't keep that in mind.


Breaking the acronym down will keep us grounded. “E” stands for “expected.” EPDs are built to forecast. The weekly genetic evaluation at Angus draws on millions of data points of animals and their ancestors to provide the best prediction of future offspring performance.

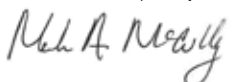
Of course, “P” stands for “progeny.” The value of EPDs is evaluating an animal's genetic merit as a parent, and should not be expected to perfectly match that animal's own performance. While an individual animal's performance is considered, EPDs separate the genetic influence or heritable portion of a trait from everything else that influenced individual performance. We understand the biggest calf at weaning might be a result of how much time was spent in the creep feeder. We all know the weight advantage coming from a nutritional benefit won't be passed along to his offspring.

Lastly, “D” represents “difference.” EPDs don't predict actual performance, but rather average performance differences in progeny between parents when those

parents are equally mated. Realizing environments and management are different between farms and ranches, using properly structured contemporary groups allows for those differences to be accounted for and the variation within a contemporary group becomes the important metric.

There's an accompanying number that's often overlooked: accuracy. As an animal has more progeny records incorporated into the evaluation, the more confidence we can have in that EPD. Genomics have allowed us to accelerate that confidence, and enables us to get at higher accuracy levels faster. André Garcia has authored a “By the Numbers” article on this topic on page 28.

The use of EPDs has become very important in breeding cattle, and therefore, influential in determining the value of registered seedstock. Breeders and commercial cattlemen have become more confident in how well EPDs work after seeing the results in their herds over the years. But like any of our tools we get comfortable with, misuse or overuse is possible. Understanding why and how those tools work helps keep us out of the “familiarity trap.” 


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