

AIMS Tech Notes

by Scott Johnson, director of Angus Information Management Software



March potpourri

In a larger issue like this one, the editors say I can write more than usual, so look out. I'm going to cover several topics this month.

Now is the best time

At almost every event I attend, I visit with Angus breeders who say something like, "I've been thinking about buying the software, but I want to wait until you get all the bugs worked out."

Well, I have good news and bad news.

The good news is, if you've been thinking along those lines, now is the *best* time to buy. Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) is as rich with features and as user-friendly as it ever has been.

The bad news is, it's still not bug-free, but I've never seen a software package that was, and that includes the biggest Microsoft programs. If you don't believe me, go to the Microsoft Web site and search for the patches they offer to fix their programs — there can be hundreds of bugs in software that complex.

But don't consider software to be bad if it has bugs. The real issue is whether the company provides new versions of the software that will fix the problem. Currently, the AIMS Department is trying harder at this than ever. Each time we have been alerted to a bug, we have worked quickly to solve the problem and to upload a patch program to fix the errors. Members can download these patch files from the Internet at any time, or they can request them on a compact disk (CD) from our office.

The point is, if you wait for the bug-free version, you never will be able to buy software. You just have to jump in and take advantage of the 99.9% of the program that works perfectly.

Why \$495?

This is another question I get asked

often, followed by, "I only have 10 head; is there a cheaper version?" I suppose I could spend the rest of my column space discussing this one issue, but I'll keep it as short as possible.

In the world of herd recordkeeping software, AIMS falls somewhere in the middle on pricing. One competitor has different versions of its software that range in price from \$295 to \$695. But only the high-end version includes features comparable to AIMS.

More importantly, the initial price for AIMS is a one-time cost. We don't have any ongoing maintenance fees; phone support is free; and all the upgrades have been made available at no cost.

It would be difficult to establish different pricing for different herd sizes. Let's say you start out with AIMS and 10 head of cattle and we charge \$200. If you then buy 10 more head, are you going to send us another \$200? I realize it can be difficult to justify \$500 for a software package, but as I already mentioned, you get a lot more than a CD with a program on it. The software requires as much to handle 10 head as it does 10,000 head, and the support does, too.

With all of the data floating around these days for the seedstock industry, it takes a software package like AIMS to turn it into useful information. The Board members who set the price and I believe the current price is appropriate.

Angus BRS

If you haven't heard already, the American Angus Association has a new program — the Angus Beef Record Service (BRS). In short, it's a recordkeeping system for commercial operations. Currently, the data from Angus BRS users is being



submitted on paper, but AIMS is being modified and expanded to facilitate submitting and receiving information from commercial producers.

Actually, AIMS can do some of the Angus BRS recordkeeping in its current form, so it won't hurt to get started if you wish. As soon as we get the Angus BRS modifications in place, you will have quick access to the changes. I hesitate to put a time line on the Angus BRS version, but I hope initial releases will be out soon after you read this column.

Internet submission

The Information Systems (IS) Department has been adding several features to the Angus Web site (www.angus.org) in recent months. If you haven't visited the site lately, you need to see what they've done. New features include a member logon



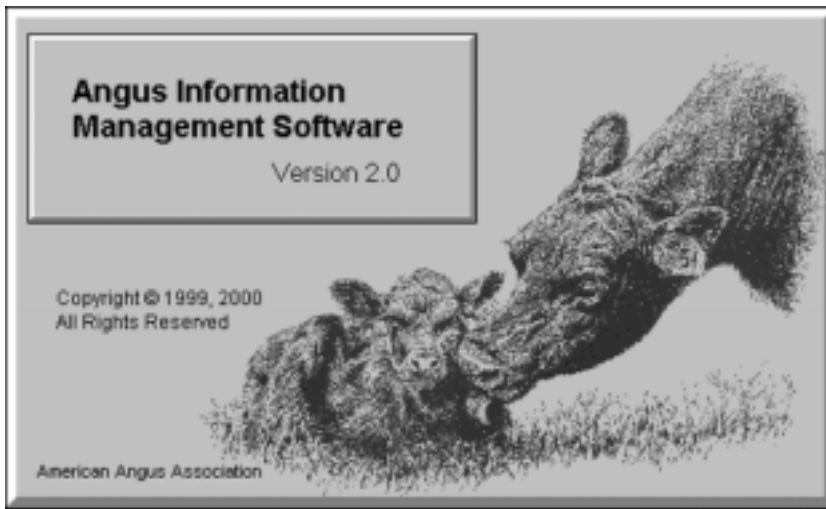
where you can view your current herd inventory, artificial insemination (AI) certificate inventory and basic address information. By the time you read this, I'm sure many other features will be added.

How does this affect AIMS? Well, future plans are for online submission of records, such as registrations and Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) data. Does this eliminate the need for AIMS? I doubt it. Actually, it may be the perfect solution for Association members to submit records on a small number of cattle, assuming they don't want to get too sophisticated or to spend a lot of money.

The Internet submission service will be a perfect alternative. You won't have to pay additional fees to submit data or records via the Internet, but normal fees for registration and AHIR still will apply.

But AIMS will continue to be useful. For example, if you want to maintain breeding, medical, sales, or income and expense records, AIMS is for you. The software

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features the Customer Manager Module that stores a wealth of information about your customers, and the reports available will be more comprehensive.

The data-submission features that will be added to the Web site are going to be great, but they won't eliminate the need for AIMS. Plus, we will continue to add features to the software that make it useful as a stand-alone program. I don't consider the Internet a competitor of AIMS. They will work together to provide more and better services to as many members as possible.

Versions 2.0d and 2.1

By now, everyone who ever has purchased AIMS should have received a CD-ROM with the version 2.0d upgrade. Actually, it was released in December, so if you still haven't seen it, please call, and we will ship another copy.

All in all, the upgrade went well. We added several new features and fixed a number of problems. AIMS 2.0d had some bugs, mainly due to some of the new features we added. The good news is that we have moved to a system where we can fix these problems quickly and distribute patch files via the Internet.

Up to this point, we have been naming the version by simply adding or changing a letter at the end of the version number. The changes have been fairly minor and there are no set rules for numbering schemes, so we just follow this one because it makes sense to us.

Now we're working on version 2.1, which includes changes to the data structure. The more significant change in version number seemed justified by the significance of

changing the data structure. We know the AIMS programming can be changed fairly easily on your computer. Granted, the programming can affect the data, too, but it can't change the structure.

First, a quick explanation of what I mean by "changing the structure." The AIMS program stores virtually all of your data in a file called *aims20.db*. Inside that file are more than 20 data tables: one for EPDs, one for birth information, one for weaning data, etc.

Data-structure changes can be one of three things: (1) a change to an existing field — for example, making the fat EPD hold three decimal places instead of two; (2) the addition of fields to existing fields — the best example here is adding 15 fields to the existing EPD table to store the new ultrasound EPDs; and (3) the addition of new tables — in this case, we'll be adding a table for Angus BRS information.

We always are careful with your data files, but we need to be especially careful when we change the structure so no data is lost. As always, we will be recommending you make backups before installing any upgrades; we'll make some for you, but we still must be careful that all the data gets converted to the new structure.

Patch files

As mentioned, we are handling minor

bug fixes and some enhancements through patches. The software industry uses the term *patch* since it is a stopgap way to fix problems between upgrades.

If you go to the AIMS Web site (www.angus.org/aims), you can follow the Messages link to information about our latest patch file. There you simply download a file, which is actually a program. When you run the program, it installs the appropriate files and programs to fix various problems.

The Web site includes a table that identifies what each patch fixes; however, you only need to download the latest patch file, which will fix everything.

When version 2.1, which will be a full upgrade on a CD-ROM, is released, it will include all of the previously released patches and the new programs necessary to conduct a major upgrade, especially the aforementioned data-structure changes.

I had a phone call recently during which a breeder asked if he needed to install every patch each time a new one came out, even if he hadn't run into a particular problem. The answer is no. We are fixing things that you may not even use in AIMS, or at least not yet. But it won't hurt to wait for a future patch or the 2.1 upgrade. It probably is a good idea to check the Web site every so often to see if we've added something you need.

We are identifying the patches with numbers like *1.0.7*. The AIMS version still will say *2.0d*, but this patch number is an even smaller designation. To determine which version you have, click on Help, then on About in AIMS, and it will give you the version and patch information. Check this number against the latest patch number on the Web site to see if you have the newest fixes.

Registry tab crashes

If you've experienced a crash when you go to the Registry tab, it could be due to one of two problems. First, there was a bug in 2.0d that only occurred if the first pen you opened when starting AIMS had been set to the Registry tab. The work-around was

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simply to open a different pen first, then open the original pen. The fix was part of Patch 1.0.3, which can be downloaded from the Internet.

The second problem developed for only certain users, even after we released Patch 1.0.3. We struggled for 10 days trying to determine the problem, but we were unable to recreate it in the office.

Finally, Thomas Medsker, the AIMS programmer, realized that the problem had to do with screen resolution. All of the affected users were using a low screen resolution (640-by-480). The problem could be fixed by simply changing to a higher resolution (800-by-600). We have since fixed the problem in AIMS (Patch 1.0.7), but you should consider changing the resolution anyway.

Screen resolution

So what do I mean by screen resolution?

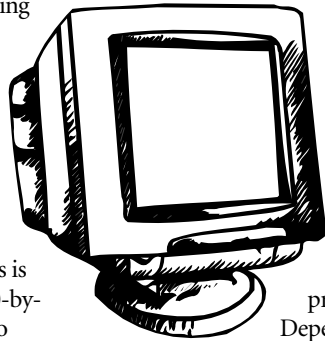
Introduction. When Windows 3.1 was released in the early 1990s, the screen resolution was a standard 640-by-480. The resolution was related to both hardware and software restrictions. Starting with Windows 95 and the hardware that operates it, the resolution can be changed to as high as 1,600-by-1,200.

AIMS was designed with 800-by-600 resolution as the default and “best” resolution. This is the next setting above 640-by-480; so just in case, we also designed screens to operate at that level (with some limitations).

Definition. The numbers of the screen resolution are a measurement of pixels, which is short for *picture elements*. Basically, the screen consists of small dots of lights, and each dot is a pixel. The more pixels you have, the higher the resolution, the smaller the pixels, and the clearer the image.

In the early days of computers, TV screens could be used for computer monitors, but the resolution was terrible because the pixels were so big. But TV screens also have advanced to the point that they are sometimes used as computer monitors again.

The resolution number, such as 640-by-480, means the monitor has 640 pixels horizontally and 480 pixels vertically. Most monitors can handle several resolutions. It's a combination of the features of the monitor, the video driver (inside the computer), the operating system (OS)



version and the specific software application.

AIMS resolution. As already mentioned, AIMS was designed with 800-by-600 resolution in mind. This mainly affects how the single-animal views are designed and the size of the tabs. Many screens, especially the spreadsheet (All) views, are capable of enlarging to whatever resolution is in place.

At minimum, it is recommended that your computer be set to 800-by-600 due to the default designs. You can use 640-by-480, but you're missing out on some valuable features. For example, the pedigree screen at 640-by-480 cannot display the animals' names — they won't fit. Also, the single-animal views of certain tabs, such as Registry, can't display at the lower resolution all of the intended fields.

Examples. I have created some screen captures for display on the AIMS Web site. In the interest of space, let me refer you to www.angus.org/aims/screenresolution.html.

Changing the resolution. This is fairly easy. Click on the Start button, then

Control Panel, then double-click on Display. Go to the Settings tab of the Display window and look for Screen Area.

Depending on your monitor, video adapter and Windows version, you will have several possible settings that can be changed by sliding the pointer left or right. The lowest setting probably will be 640-by-480.

Depending on your system's limitations, it may stop at 1,024-by-768. Once you have picked a setting and clicked OK or Apply, the resolution will change. But it will be temporary until you click Yes when asked if you wish to keep those settings. At first, you may cringe at how small the pictures and words are, but as you get used to it, you will wonder how you ever got along without it.

Of course, there is a limit to how high you can set the resolution before it really is impossible to read, but give it a chance — at least at one increment above what you have been using. It's also reasonable to change the resolution depending on what software you are using at the time or who is using it.

You will need to restart AIMS for it to recognize the change in resolution settings.

Tattoos

I've been asked if you can use more than

four characters (not including an extension) for the tattoo.

Yes and no.

First, we have to define some differences between the physical tattoo in a calf's ear and an AIMS tattoo for recordkeeping.

The physical tattoo, which must be in place for a calf to be registered, can be no longer than four characters (letters or numbers).

When AIMS first was created, the programmers had to pick a field that would be unique for each animal. They decided on *tattoo* for several reasons, but mainly because registered cattle must have a tattoo.

But four characters obviously are not enough to uniquely identify every animal, not to mention possible duplication in other herds. So they made the tattoo field nine characters long and added an extension to make the tattoo unique.

For example, the physical tattoo of a calf might be 1234. If a different animal has the same tattoo, the new calf could be designated 1234-C01 (a cow born in 2001). The hyphen serves as a visual separator for humans and a good divider for the computer. If necessary, other schemes can be used, but this works well. (The AIMS Help file includes more about tattoos.)

When you enter calves and submit the registrations, AIMS and the Association main computer (we call it RODEO) know that only the characters up to the hyphen — assuming there are no more than four characters — will be the official tattoo.

Everything else is to satisfy AIMS.

There are three keys to satisfying both AIMS and RODEO:

1. The physical tattoo includes one, two, three or four characters;
2. The overall tattoo in AIMS is unique from all others in the system; and
3. The tattoo field in AIMS must start with the physical tattoo.

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