



IF MARKETING YOUR CATTLE means a trip to a nearby buying station and commodity prices that hardly cover expenses, maybe it's time to look for an alternative.

Clearly, it's important for breeders to know about genetics, proven performance and preconditioning, all of which can add up to a top-quality end product. But getting paid commodity prices for that product can mean losses instead of profits.

Many producers are finding success in value-added marketing by researching ways either to market their cattle live or in the beef. One example is ErReR Hill Farms. Other examples follow in this series on alternative marketing.

Finding an Alternative

Selling in the beef provides opportunity to capitalize on value added through genetic improvement.

Story & photos by **Janet Mayer**

Sidney Riggs is a self-made businessman who has made marketing an ongoing part of his life. He enjoys the challenge of new enterprises, as evidenced by his partnership in Riggs Industry, a corporation of five companies, and the ownership of ErReR Hill Farms. Located near Somerset, Pa., the farm is owned and operated by Riggs and his wife, Alberta, who raise registered Angus cattle, ostriches, llamas and miniature horses.

Under the management of Robert Hay, the operation is fast approaching half a century of breeding Angus cattle. Beginning as a dairy operation in 1946, under the ownership of Riggs and his brother Robert,

the farm switched to registered Angus cattle in 1957, initially selling seedstock through local and state consignment sales, the Pennsylvania State Bull Test and private treaty from the farm. For the past two years, the operation has conducted bull sales, and it had its first female sale this past November.

"We have always supplied meat to the people who work here at the farm and have sold freezer beef locally," Riggs says. "I guess it was my idea to start selling frozen retail cuts of beef and ground beef about five or six years ago, and we put a freezer in the True Value Hardware and farm equipment store we own. Every Thursday, we deliver fresh

ground beef to five restaurants and sell all the steaks we can supply to a country club some distance north of here. We also sell frozen cuts of beef and ostrich meat and leather products here at the farm."

Sherri Lynch, head of retail sales for the farm, says ErReR Hill customers tell her they like the fact that the cattle are fed crops grown at the farm and that no implants or antibiotics are used. Although the cattle are confined to one area, they still have access to pasture while being fed a diet of high-moisture corn, oats, grass and hay with minerals and salt.

Three to four finished cattle, weighing 1,100-1,200 pounds (lb.) each, are harvested weekly. They are trucked to nearby Somerset, to LaRue's, where they are harvested under U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspection. The carcasses are aged before they are cut and vacuum packaged.

Riggs says it is very difficult to explain the relationship between the retail meat business and breeding stock business. Selling to both ends of the spectrum, the operation is constantly changing breeding strategies, trying to improve on carcass quality. Special attention is paid to carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs) in an effort to achieve better marbling and less backfat in order to produce a better product for the table. To achieve its goal, the operation uses proven carcass bulls.

"The high price of slaughter is one drawback to selling meat products, not only for the beef, but the ostriches as well," Riggs says. "Slaughter prices are raised to us, then we have to raise our prices to customers. We get hot dogs, beef sticks, jerky and summer sausage made, so we need to have consistency in our products, but many times they are not consistent. I have often thought of building our own facility to process the meat after it is slaughtered. It would give us more control, although I don't know that it would save us any money.

"Another concern is that, if the market for our beef continues to expand, I don't know as we are going to be able to meet the demand. I think we might want to try buying feeders back from some of our bull buyers, which would be good for them because it would give them a market for their calves."



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