

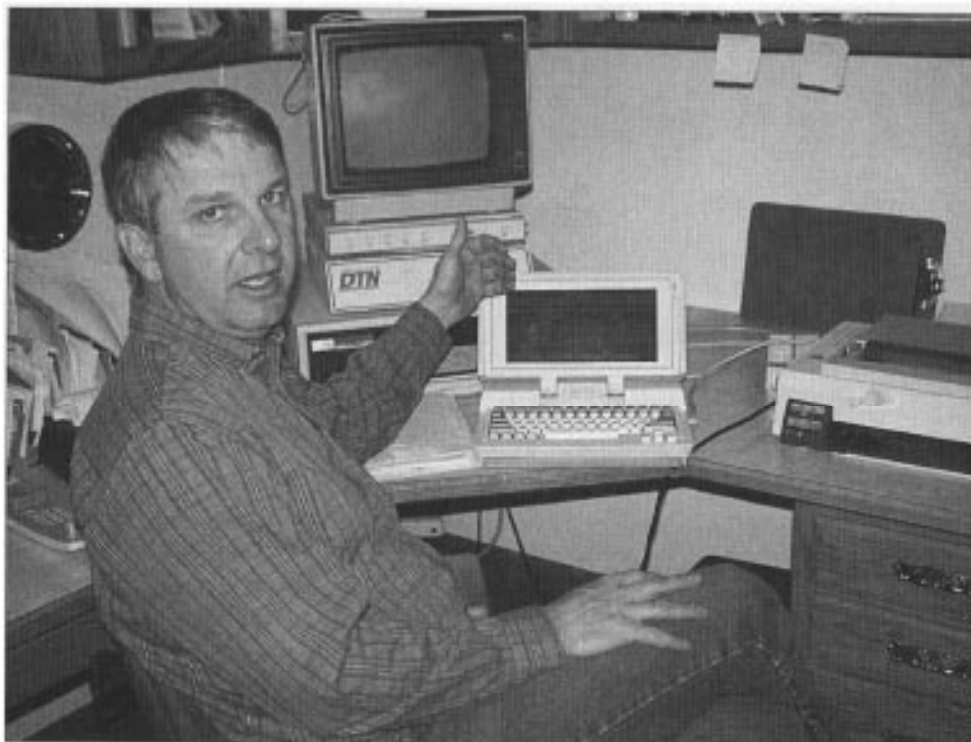
Numbers Guide Kelly Ranch Toward Higher Value Herd

You could say Mike Kelly ranches by the number. The Sutherland, Neb., cattleman also likes to visually appraise his Angus and black baldy cows. But if his best looking cow produces a steer that finishes with a 620-pound carcass, or one that won't grade at least Select, she's history.

It's the same with bulls. "The first thing I do when I'm looking for bulls is to go through the Angus Sire Summary: Kelly says. "Then I look up the latest results of the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Value Discovery Program and identify the sires of progeny that did well."

After talking to several breeders, he's ready to buy. "Sometime I'll buy sons of the bull I'm interested in from two or three breeders." Kelly monitors actual performance against expected progeny difference (EPD) expectations. If one bull is linked to a couple of the light or poor grading carcass progeny, he, too, is history.

The Kelly Ranch first turned to Angus bulls on their Hereford cows in the 1970s for calving ease and to keep more efficient black baldy replacements. "We wanted a more uniform herd— not just the cows, but especially the calves — and that translates to a uniform carcass: Kelly says. "We dabbled in exotics



All the numbers from conception to carcass interface with programs that feed into IRM-SPA in Kelly's computer. With monthly inventory reports, he knows how the year is going.

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Kelly's background as an agriculture banker figures into his attention to numbers. It also made him a natural to help test the National Cattlemen's Association (NCA) recordkeeping system. He volunteered when the Integrated Resource Management (IRM) Standardized Performance Analysis (SPA) program for cow herd management was

introduced in 1990.

The expanded program now includes replacement heifer and stocker-feeder enterprises, a welcome development for Kelly. He considers his operation a cow ranch with stocker enterprises. The bigger steers go to a commercial feedlot after 30 to 45 days of preconditioning.

The other steers and heifers are backgrounded, replacements selected by January, and the balance grazed for feedlot placement in the fall.

When he first retained ownership on feed of the 1979

calf crop, Kelly was a little disappointed. He'd heard about the CAB Program and figured his blacks could win those dollar premiums.

"I found out that it's not that simple. Just because you have black cattle doesn't mean you're on top of the world," he says. "They have to have carcasses that meet CAB Program requirements."

Now a key goal is attaining a higher percentage of CAB Program qualified calves from his herd. That became easier 10 years ago when Kelly stopped trying to find "heifer bulls" that could meet his carcass goals.

B Y S T E V E S U T H E R

"It got to be quite a balancing act when you had to consider calving ease, weaning and yearling weight, carcass traits and milk," he says.

The top qualifier was calving ease, and the top problem was that those bulls graduated into the main Kelly bull battery.

Artificial insemination of all heifers now divides bull selection criteria. Kelly selects proven calving ease sires that are positive, if not outstanding, on all other traits. Such bulls are few and expensive to buy, but their semen is affordable, he notes. The mature cows get natural service from moderate framed sons of bulls that lead in carcass traits with strong positives in growth and maternal traits.

"There's no question I've changed the type of bull I'm looking for, now that I don't have to worry about calving ease," Kelly says. "I want more volume and thickness, depth of rib, more total red meat."

Carcass data is increasingly important to Kelly. "In the past we've sold on a live basis, and the packers have been a little resistant to giving back all the information we'd like. This year we're getting NCA 'CARDS' data back."

USDA Meat Animal Research Center veterinarian scientist Dee Griffin has followed Kelly's steer carcasses through packing as part of a local feed yards beef quality audit. Because of that feedback, Kelly now brands lighter and has modified vaccination procedures.

Like a lot of producers interested in the CAB F'rogram and improving carcass value, Kelly has participated in the CAB Value Discovery Program, but he says it's hard to pick a representative 10 or 15 head from a large herd.

"You tend to send the better cattle," he says. "I cant



All Kelly cows have two ID tags, the numbers cross referenced with their metal Bangs tag for easy computer tracking. If a calf must be pulled, a cow tag is notched; three strikes and they're out.

compare my herd average to those 10 or 15 head. To totally evaluate my herd, I want all of them in there."

He will continue to use Value Discovery to monitor progress toward CAB

at pregnancy test time, and I've seen some of our 1,300- and 1,400 pound cows; invariably they're open."

Even if they're bred, that's no automatic ticket to stay on the Kelly Ranch. "This year,

weaning weights alone. In fact, the heaviest heifers won't stay, because they are aberrations toward an extreme.

Kelly can't afford that in the dawning age of value-

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Program standards, but NCA's Cattleman's Carcass Data Service has become Kelly's primary mol. That helps him avoid extremes, a pitfall Kelly is particularly sensitive toward, admitting he used to select bulls too tall for his range.

"A lot of our calves are now being slaughtered at 14-15 months, so quality grade is a concern," Kelly says. "We're striving for a cow that weighs between 1,000 and 1,150 pounds. We weigh all our cows

we sold every cow that produced a calf with a Standard carcass. It was only half a dozen, and while you might question how much of it was the cows' fault, we felt it was better just to cull them out, even at this low market."

Heavier culling to develop a higher carcass value herd means keeping more replacement heifers, but that's fine with Kelly. After all, he's trying to make genetic progress. Again, that doesn't mean keeping heifers off of

based marketing. He's conferred with several organizers of "strategic alliances" that ensure beef quality and maintain producer identity all the way to the consumer.

"It's the wave of the future and we plan to be on board." Angus genetics have everything he'll need for that voyage.

