

## State Spotlight Series:

This is the third in a series of articles featuring the programs and services of some of the leading state Angus associations.

# Angus In Big Sky Country

Montana's secret behind good Angus cattle? A progressive mind-set, good genetics.

by Crystal Albers

**M**ontana. Known for its open spaces and big sky, the state boasts a reputation for progressive Angus genetics. But with the more than 2.4 million total cattle inhabiting the vast valleys and mountain ranges of the fourth-largest state in the nation comes progressive cattlemen — namely the 450 members of the Montana Angus Association.

“We’ve got a lot of really strong breeders in this state,” says Lindsay Williams, secretary of the Montana Angus Association. “They’re

very dedicated to their programs, dedicated to the association, and they want to see it flourish.”

### A rich history ...

Behind the Montana Angus Association’s stalwart 62-year history is a membership base proud of its advancements in performance testing and its leadership on the national level. The state has consistently claimed the most Angus cattle registered annually, ranking No. 1 for the past 20 consecutive years.

In fiscal year (FY) 2003, Montana accumulated 27,071

new registrations and placed third in number of transfers. Of the 8,274 Pathfinder dams listed in this issue’s *2004 Pathfinder Report* insert, 16.4% are Montana-bred, as are 39.7% of Pathfinder sires. And in FY 2003, Montana breeders submitted 12.6% of the weaning weights and 13.3% of yearling weights entered into the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program.

John Patterson, president of the Montana Angus Association, says the state’s long-running success is due, in part, to some of the state’s pioneer breeders who were instrumental in the development of performance testing.



► **Above:** The Montana Angus Association’s annual Angus tour is its most well-attended event of the year. Since its first event in 1974, the tour has grown to what Bob Cook, Billings, Mont., calls one of the most prestigious tours in the nation. Now, tour organizers can expect 400-700 people at the September event.

► **Left:** The Montana Angus Association tour gives breeders an opportunity to display their breeding programs. Chartered buses transport tour participants to various stops to view displayed cattle. The tour rotates each year between different regions of the state, giving exposure to different local associations.

PHOTOS BY PAM PATTERSON

“We’re probably one of the first states that actually recorded birth weights, weaning weights, yearling weights, average daily gain (ADG) — those sort of things that measured economic traits of cattle that we were raising,” he says. “That was essentially the precursor to a lot of the data that’s in our current database. It helped develop the AHIR structure and, ultimately, the EPD (expected progeny difference) system. That’s something we can all be very proud of.”

American Angus Association Director Bill Davis is a Sidney, Mont., breeder familiar with the state’s success story. His father, Dale, was a charter member of the Montana Beef Performance Association, established after Montana State University (MSU) released heritability estimates for performance traits in 1956.

“Montana has been known for having a large amount of influence on the idea of performance testing, of within-herd performance selection. It has been one of the leaders in the performance movement,” Bill says.

### ... a rich future

Besides genetically proven Angus cattle, Patterson says members are also proud of the state’s Angus leaders. In a state where cattle outnumber people almost 3-to-1, numerous Montana natives have served on the American Angus Association Board of Directors, while three Montana women have been named president of the American Angus Auxiliary, and four juniors have served on the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) Board.

“We take great pride in the leadership positions that Montana Angus cattle and Montana Angus breeders have obtained over many years,” Patterson says. “We’re now looking at cattle breeding programs that are on their third or fourth generation of the same family continuing to build on what previous generations have developed.”

Williams describes the membership within the Montana Angus Association as steady.

“Obviously, the leadership has changed hands many times, but the core membership remains constant,” she says. “The goal remains constant, and quality Angus genetics remain constant.”

Former Montana Angus Association president Russ Pepper of Simms, Mont., says the state association has, for the most part, kept that consistency since its inception in 1942.

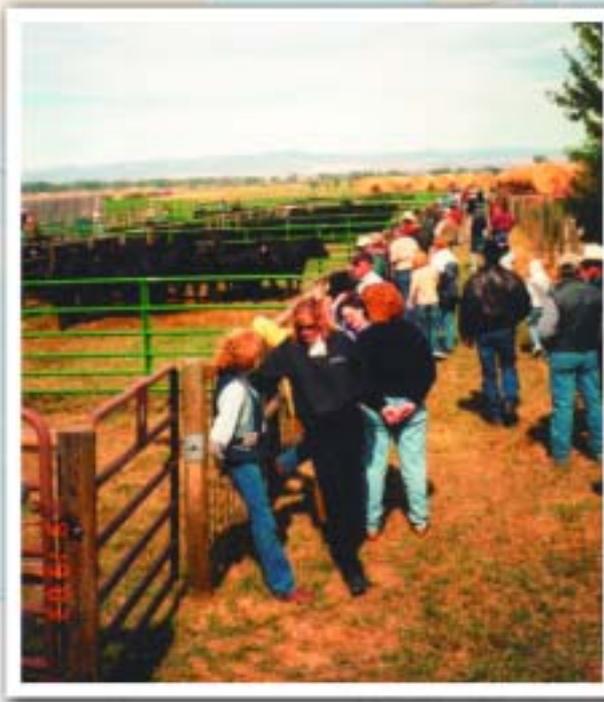


PHOTO BY YVONNE HINMAN

► The two-day tour draws a national and international crowd. John Patterson, president of the Montana Angus Association, says the 2003 Montana Angus Tour attracted people from about 28 states and three Canadian provinces.

“It’s still a grassroots organization to benefit Angus breeders. It’s always going to be traditionally that kind of an organization,” he says. “We try to have a board of directors who are from throughout the state of Montana, from different areas, to represent the whole state and the local associations at the state level.”

Patterson says another key to the association’s well-rounded leadership is its ability to utilize its members’ various talents.

“The way to keep an association viable is to keep its members active,” he says. “Our members bring a lot of talent to the table. The common denominator is that we’re all breeders of Angus cattle; but, within our group, we also have expertise in banking, personnel relations, marketing — the list goes on.”

By drawing on such talents, Patterson hopes to strengthen the association, as well as the breed. He has appointed numerous standing committees to meet two or three times per year in order to incorporate talents of members who may not have extra time for more time-consuming boards or committees.

Betsy Indreland, Montana Angus Auxiliary president, recognizes the same type of diverse membership within the state auxiliary.

“We have a really diverse membership that lends to the success of our organization. We have such a broad wealth of information, a resource of ideas,” she says.

Many of those resources focus on Montana’s junior Angus program. The auxiliary offers two annual scholarships to juniors and awards various prizes to top Angus breeding projects in county fairs throughout the state. The auxiliary also hosts an Angus queen and princess program.

“We truly care about Angus cattle and the future of our breed, that’s why so much focuses on junior programs — that’s our future,” she says.

### From near and far

Behind great leaders are great programs, such as the Montana Angus Association annual tour and the various association-sponsored feeder-calf sales throughout the state.

Patterson says the Montana Angus Association has taken an innovative outlook to marketing

Angus genetics. Rather than develop a market for purebred breeders, the association has focused on providing a market for commercial producers who support purebred members. Four feeder-calf sales in the fall, at locations in Billings, Miles City, Glasgow and Ramsay, help promote what Patterson calls the true lifeblood of Angus business in Montana — the success of the commercial rancher.

“By supporting the people that support us, it’s a complete circle,” he says, adding that the association hopes to incorporate the AngusSource program into future feeder sales. “If those people have a little more money in their pockets, maybe they’re more willing to come back and buy more Angus bulls the next year, adding more value to their herds and putting more money in the pockets of Montana Angus breeders.”

Pepper says the state-sponsored sales have really helped boost sales for commercial producers using purebred Angus genetics. “Anytime we try to encourage involvement in Angus feeder-calf sales, it helps them merchandise their product, and we will see premium dollars paid since they’re Angus-sired cattle.”

Although the feeder calf sales have gained in success, the annual Montana Angus tour remains the most popular and well-attended event.

Bob Cook, of Vermilion Ranch, Billings, Mont., says the Montana Angus Association annual tour has had much success since it first began in 1974. Cook was a regional manager for the American Angus Association at the time of the first tour, and he has

CONTINUED ON PAGE 46

## Angus In Big Sky Country

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 45

watched it grow to what he calls, “one of the most prestigious tours in the United States and most well-attended year end, year out.”

Patterson said the association can expect anywhere from 400-700 people at the two-day tour each September. Co-sponsored by local associations, the tour rotates between regions, giving breeders in all local areas invaluable marketing opportunities. Last year’s tour attracted Angus enthusiasts from

about 28 different states and three Canadian provinces.

“One of the things the tour has done from its inception is discover a lot of people,” Cook says. Although the big-name breeders may draw a large crowd, Cook and Patterson agree the tour serves as a discovery-ground for smaller-scale breeders.

“It’s not unusual to go to these tours and find some truly premier cattle displayed by some of the smaller-scale breeders. It’s been a great stepping stone for some small-scale breeders to truly get recognized within the breed,” Patterson says.

So what’s behind the Montana Angus Association tour’s 30-year success? Much like the success of Montana Angus genetics, Cook says it’s the people.

“There’s a lot of good breeders in the state of Montana who want to make their breed and the state association strong, and they work at it,” he says. “There are quite a few large herds in the state of Montana; but, for every large herd there are three or four smaller herds — and it takes them all to make it work.”

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## Q&A with the Montana Angus Association

*As a common feature in the state spotlight series, the Angus Journal posed the following questions to one of the state’s Angus leaders. John Patterson, president of the Montana Angus Association, answered the following regarding the association’s past, present and future.*

**How has membership in the Montana Angus Association changed throughout the years? Has it grown, gotten smaller or stayed the same?**

Membership numbers in the association have remained fairly static at about 450 members. Our membership doesn’t really vary more than 20 members a year.

**What is unique about your association?**

We take great pride in the leadership positions that Montana Angus cattle and Montana Angus breeders have obtained over many years. It’s gratifying to us as an association to see the success that these breeders have had, not meaning that there isn’t room for young and new breeders, because there certainly is. Montana breeders are very involved and very genuine with their support in mentoring new breeders. They are also very, very progressive. They’re always willing to look at new genetics and new ideas to further their own programs and the breed.

**What is the most successful program your state has developed to support Montana Angus breeders?**

Historically, the most successful program that has been developed over time has to be the Montana Angus Tour. The first tour was in 1974. They are held ever year in September. The largest we’ve ever had was about 700, but we can pretty much expect to have about 400-700 on an annual basis.

It’s incredible. It’s truly an event. It gives breeders the opportunity to display what their breeding programs are all about. You could never pay enough money for the exposure that these breeders gain. It’s essentially two days of traveling on chartered buses and going to various stops and looking at either livestock displayed at a home ranch or at central locations where a group of breeders come together to display their livestock.

We also have association-sponsored feeder-calf sales, the NILE (Northern International Livestock Exposition) Angus Female Sale and Pen Show and the Midland Bull Test Angus sale. The *Montana Angus News* is published four times a year, and our membership directory comes out once a year.

**How do you motivate producers to participate in the various programs you offer?**

For programs like the tour, it has been such a historical event that

many people go back and tell their friends. We advertise in the *Angus Journal* every year, and a lot of people plan their vacations to come to Montana for the Angus tour.

Also, I’ve always believed that in any association, the way to keep an association viable is to keep its members active. If we can draw on some of the talent of some of the people out there in membership and bring them into this, I think we can make the association stronger and do some things probably more correctly and advance the association.

It’s been exciting. I think we’re going to advance the whole association and develop more membership involvement.

**What is the biggest challenge facing state associations today? How do you try to overcome that challenge?**

The big challenge facing any association is the old saying “What have you done for me lately?” There has to be a purpose for any organization. I believe that we’re resting on some of the very successful programs that we have developed within the state, but we’re also looking at new things to try to bring membership into all levels of the association and develop some new and exciting avenues to develop leadership.

The biggest disadvantage with Montana, as a state, is that we’re so big. We have such a diverse membership. We’re diverse because of geography; we’re somewhat diverse because of climate, but we’re also spread out because it’s a big state. There’s only about 900,000 people in the whole state. We’re sparsely populated. It’s difficult for breeders to get together unless there’s some sort of structured function or event in which to gather, like the annual meeting and banquet held each year in conjunction with the NILE. We try to do that periodically so breeders can get together and share ideas and just socialize.

**Where do you see the Montana Angus Association in the future? Do you see producer programs changing?**

We’ve always been progressive enough to look at any new ideas, but we’ve always been traditional enough that before a decision is made, it has to be progressive for all breeders. We will look at expanding our feeder market situation. We’ll look at expanding the marketing of purebred cattle.

**Why is Montana a good place to raise Angus cattle? What are some of the region’s advantages and disadvantages?**

We’re very fortunate that we’ve been blessed with wonderful grass and a climate conducive to producing cattle. It’s very challenging at times. Some of us have been going through six years of sustained drought.

However, through challenging climatic conditions, we’ve made the cattle better. The drought has taught us that there are certain types of cattle that will survive and thrive. Mother Nature has done as much to help us sort these cattle as any measurement that we have. We’ve been able to find out what cattle will work and which cattle won’t in this environment. Usually, cattle that leave here can survive and thrive in different environments.