

# A Hairy Situation

*Hair shedding scores can help breeders identify productive and efficient females.*

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor*

One cow, two cow, haired cow, slick cow.

While not quite as unique in their makeup as a Dr. Suess poem, there is a lot of variety of the type and kind of Angus cattle currently in the United States. From differences in genetics to variance in phenotype, there's an Angus cow to fit every herd.

This also rings true for the way cattle shed hair in the spring and summer months.

“Hair shedding is a trait that evaluates the animals’ ability to tolerate heat,” says Esther McCabe, director of performance programs at the American Angus Association. “In heat-stressed environments or areas with fescue, the ability for an animal to shed the winter coat early in the season can impact production and efficiency.”

McCabe says research suggests a negative correlation exists between body condition score (BCS) and hair shedding, simply meaning the longer a cow maintains her winter coat, the more her overall body condition decreases.

However, the effects of the hair shedding trait reach beyond the cow herself.

“If a cow is spending her energy to maintain her own body temperature, that energy is not being put into other areas of production, such as milk production,” McCabe adds.

Cows that keep more of their winter coats may wean a lighter

calf — a scenario that doesn't bode well for profitability.

The American Angus Association launched a research EPD for hair shedding Feb. 5, 2020. It is because of the dedication of Angus members that the Hair Shed EPD will transition from the research environment to a production EPD in May 2022.

## Back to the basics

Cattle are scored on a 1-5 scale for the hair shedding trait.

“A score of 1 is 100% shed out, no winter coat remaining. A score of 2 represents 75% shed and only holding hair around the flanks and belly. A score of 3 represents 50% shedding, where we see hair lost along the top line and down the brisket. A score of 4

represents 25% shed out, so the winter coat has been shed from the head and the neck. A score of 5 represents a 0% shed, so the animal is still carrying a full winter coat,” McCabe says.

Cattle need be at least in the yearling age window for scores to be collected, and these scores should be collected every year.

McCabe recommends scores be collected in the late spring (typically from May to June), as this is when the most variation in hair shedding can be seen in the herd. She says variation in the herd's shedding is crucial.

“If all animals are still in a full winter coat or totally slicked off, there is no variation in scores,” she explains. “Those scores cannot be used in the genetic evaluation.”



PHOTOS BY JOE LOWE

## Living proof

Oak Hollow is an Angus ranch located in south-central Kentucky. Kenneth Lowe and his son, Joe, manage more than 400 females, emphasizing maternal characteristics as they produce calves for commercial customers.

“Fescue is the dominant forage in our area — there’s no getting rid of it, only working around it,” Joe explains. “You have to work with what you’ve got.”

Though Joe says his cattle can gain well grazing on fescue, side effects for cattle consuming the forage include increased respiratory and heart rates.

“In heat stressed environments or areas with fescue,” McCabe says, “the ability for an animal to shed the winter coat early in the season can impact production and efficiency.”

It was this hard truth that led Joe and his father to participate in a hair shedding research project by the University of Missouri.

“Once we got going with it, we saw the benefit with it and kept going,” Joe says.

Since 2014, they’ve collected hair

shedding scores on each of their females.

“It’s as small of a time investment for data collection as you can have. Anything that the Association is willing to develop a tool for — it’s important for us to use,” Joe says.

Between the ease of data collection and the trait’s heritability, Joe says hair shedding has actually become a keep-or-cull decision for their herd.

With eight years of experience under their belts, the team at Oak Hollow has a pretty foolproof plan for gathering hair shedding scores. Joe considers hair shedding scoring to be a one-man job — he says he can collect data on his 300-head spring herd in a single day.

The process of data collection starts in the office, however. Joe creates a spreadsheet with all his cows’ information and a corresponding column to record hair shed scores. He then prints out a copy of the Association’s scoring guide as a reference document and heads out to the pasture.

Joe prefers to break his cattle up into breeding groups of 25-30 head,

and makes the cows come to him by taking a bag of mineral with him.


He does entire contemporary groups at a time, and he prefers to check the main herd while his dad collects scores on the heifers. This process helps prevent any skewed data based on how each of them might see an animal. Joe says they are looking for differences, not absolutes, when it comes to hair shedding.

The more scores a producer collects, the easier it gets, Joe adds. If he or his father ever question their scores, they’ll just go out again and collect an updated set.

Once all the data has been collected, Joe emphasizes the importance of submitting scores to the Association. Inputting scores is the biggest time constraint of the entire process, but Joe says it’s worth the effort as he believes the hair shed EPD has benefits that stretch the borders of his operation.

He says these numbers have value for commercial customers, and all cattlemen are starting to recognize the importance of this trait.

He reminds his peers in the seedstock industry they are paid on performance and should be dedicated to expressing genetic potential to customers. In his region, slick hair is about the fourth item on a customer’s list of desires.

“We want to collect the data to build another tool for our toolbox and help our commercial customers in the long run,” he says. “I recommend everyone collect these scores.” 

*Editor’s note: Visit [angus.org/Performance/documents/Hairshedding\\_Guidelines\\_FINAL.PDF](https://angus.org/Performance/documents/Hairshedding_Guidelines_FINAL.PDF) for more information on collecting hair shedding scores.*

**SCAN FOR MORE**  
on A Hairy Situation or visit  
[www.angusjournal.net](https://www.angusjournal.net)

