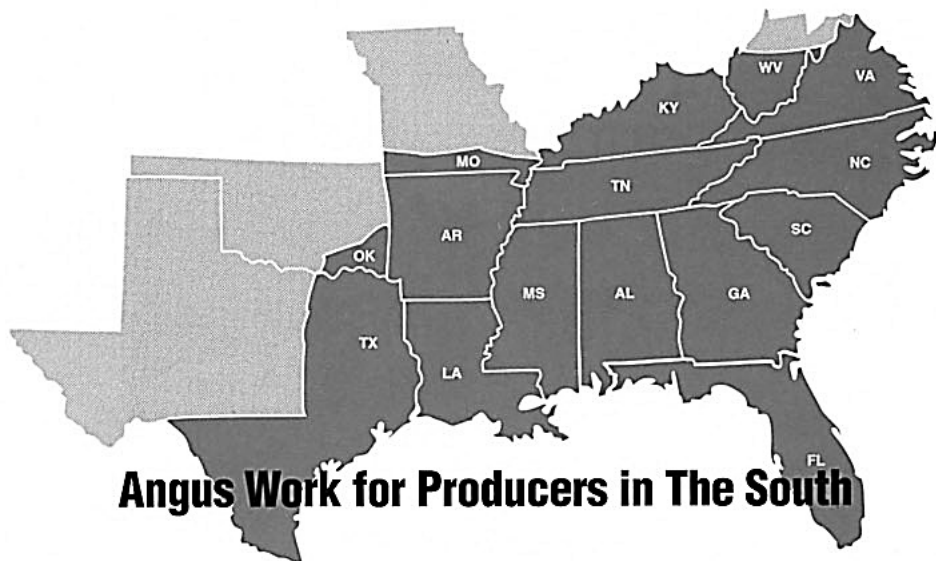


THE SOUTH



Angus Work for Producers in The South

Perhaps no other region of the United States offers a more diverse environment or geography than The South. From the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, to the Piedmont and Coastal Plain of the Middle South, to the Gulf Coast states of the Deep South, major differences exist in climatic conditions, forage types and terrain.

Characterized predominately by commercial cow-calf operations, The South is a vast reservoir of feeder calves for the Corn Belt region and for feedlots in the Great Plains. With 8.6 million beef cows in The South, this accounts for 25 percent of the total cows in the United States.

Typically, many calves are stockered on grass and small grain forages before being transported to major feeding areas of the United States. Notably absent from the Southern region are the feedlots and packing plants common in the Midwest and Great Plains.

FORAGE AVAILABILITY

Because of the long growing season and the mild climate of The South, grass is the major renewable resource for beef producers. Cows have to utilize grass to maintain body condition, develop reproductive capacity and wean a calf acceptable to feedlot

operators. In many areas it's possible to run a cow-calf unit on as few as 1.5 to 2 acres of land.

Forages vary greatly, but the key to efficient production is the availability of abundant forage when the brood cow is nursing her calf. Major grasses include cool-season forages such as fescue and orchardgrass, and warm-season grasses such as Bermuda and bahia. Wheat, rye and ryegrass provide alternate grazing in winter and early spring, while millets and sorghum hybrids furnish abundant forage during the summer months.

A major advantage for southern cattle producers is the ability to use combinations of cool- and warm-season grasses plus clovers that can provide year-round grazing. That means producers need only a minimal amount of stored feed to support the nutritional needs of the brood cows.

Grasses in this region contain high amounts of water, especially in the spring. It's essential that brood cows have adequate volume and rumen capacity if they are to be productive in this region of the country. Also, a condition called "summer slump," characterized by lower weight gains and reproductive performance of cattle grazing fungus-infected fescue is common during this time.

However, the diversity of forages available and the favorable climatic conditions make it possible to meet the nutritional needs of cow-calf and stocker operations year-round.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Most cattle producers in The South and Southeast have fewer than 30 cows. Many cattle farms are a part of larger diversified farming operations which may include cotton, peanuts, corn, soybeans and even other livestock, such as poultry or swine. Cattle often serve as a source of supplemental income for producers who have off-farm vocations as a major income source. Consequently, commercial cattle farms tend to be low input operations.

While large beef operations exist, especially in Florida, abundant forages in this region set the tone for low-input production practices. Under these environmental conditions, cows that calve and raise a calf each year usually score one frame size smaller and about 100 pounds lighter than genetically comparable cows in the Midwest and West.

ANGUS FILL NICHE

Commercial cattlemen, first and foremost, want cows that will deliver a live calf unassisted. This observation is true for most U.S. regions because recent surveys indicate calf birth weight and calving ease rank consistently high as factors commercial cattlemen consider when purchasing a bull for their herd.

In The South, low birth weight Angus bulls bring a premium at test stations and at private treaty sales. The Angus breed has positioned itself uniquely as a breed that not only offers calving ease, but a breed that can also supply weaning and yearling growth in the same package.

For the small herd that can utilize only one bull, low birth weight, high growth Angus bulls can be used on both heifers and cows and still exploit the benefits of calving

BY TERRY E. KISER, PROFESSOR OF ANIMAL SCIENCE, THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

ease in heifers and maintain growth traits in the mature cows. Clearly, low birth weight and calving ease are traits valued by commercial cattlemen in The South.

The majority of calves produced here are sold at weaning or after a stockering phase. Commercial cattlemen want their cows to wean a heavy calf since they get paid for pounds of calf. How the commercial cattleman accomplishes this goal varies from farm to farm because management practices and forage programs vary widely in The South.

Both milk and preweaning growth are important in developing cattle that are adapted to an environment. It is this diversity of milk and growth in the Angus breed that gives the commercial cattleman the ability to match cattle to their environment and management. Opinion varies about how much milk and growth are necessary in commercial operation, but most producers agree the cow must become pregnant, deliver and wean a live calf, and then become pregnant within 80 days after calving. If these conditions are met then weaning weight of the calf should be dictated by the economics required to achieve the desired weaning weights. Producers want weaning weight as heavy as possible, but cost of inputs have to justify the weights.

Beef producers have become acutely aware of the importance of the end product and how it conforms to the ideals of consumers. Typically, Southern calves have been stereotyped as inferior animals for the feedlots of the Plains. The reasons for this bias were that mortality rates were unacceptably high after the calves entered the feedlots and secondly, that Southern calves lacked the quality, uniformity and muscling desired by the feedlots and packers and ultimately the consumer.

Many regional programs have been developed in recent years to minimize health problems of calves as they enter the feedlots. For example, the Georgia Pride Program establishes guidelines regarding vaccination schedules and management practices that must be completed before calves are certified. Tracking these cattle through feedlots of western Kansas has documented that calves from The South actually experienced fewer health problems than those from other areas of the United States.

Thus, The South is currently not only a source of cattle for the feedlots but equally the source of cattle that can compete health-wise with cattle from other parts of

the country. This is a great success story.

Finally, the concept of value-based marketing has ignited the cattle industry to look to the future and to what will be acceptable to the feedlot, packer and consumer. The problems of excess fat and consistent quality affect the entire cattle industry. Beef producers in The South will have to develop the desired product to remain competitive not only within the cattle industry, but with the poultry and pork industries as well.

For the past decade commercial cattlemen have used other breeds to increase frame and growth, but they have lost some of the economically important carcass traits. These cattlemen are now utilizing Angus germ plasm to infuse carcass attributes back into their herds. They are acutely aware of the emphasis on carcass traits in the Angus breed and the potential impact they will have on the future of cow-calf operations in The South.

WHAT'S IN STORE FOR THE SOUTH?

Management of cow-calf operations will continue to revolve around the available forages. However, the industry will have to develop a more balanced, common sense approach to efficiency of production . . . bigger is not always better and maximums are not always the best. To remain competitive, the quality and consistency of beef will have to be a major focal point of the industry.

Because of the large genetic base of Angus cattle, the diversity of traits and the identification of specific traits that are economically important to the commercial cattlemen, I believe the Angus breed will continue to play a major and pivotal role in the cattle industry not only in The South, but throughout the nation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry E. Kiser is professor of animal and dairy science at The University of Georgia, Athens. He teaches undergraduate and graduate students and conducts research with beef cattle. His major research areas are reproduction in the postpartum cow, enhancement of fertility and calf birth weight, and calving difficulty in cattle. The American Angus Association is funding research at The University of Georgia on "The effects of maternal birth weight EPDs on birth weight and calving difficulty in Angus cattle."

GRASS FARMERS' FAVORITES

In the Southeast beef producers have more than 40 forage species to select from today. These are routinely planted for grazing, hay and/or silage.

Still, it's interesting to note that none of the forage plants we commonly use at the present are native to this region. All were introduced from some other part of the world.

For example, bahia grass and Dallis grass came from South America; the lespedezas originated in the Orient; and most of the winter annuals we use came from the Mediterranean area. Tall fescue and orchardgrass came from Europe, and alfalfa is believed to have originated in Iran. Bermuda grass as well as crabgrass (the plant which often makes it difficult for us to establish Bermuda grass) came from Africa.

A lot of truth and wisdom lie in the statement, "You need to go with what works." The fact that plant introduction has been highly successful in the past provides strong encouragement for continued evaluation of plants from other parts of the world.

— *Dr. Don Ball, Auburn University
Extension forage specialist*

JULY WEATHER ALMANAC

Southeast Coast

Avg. temperature = 79 degrees F.
Avg. rainfall = 4 inches

Florida

Avg. temperature = 82.5 degrees F.
Avg. rainfall = 3-6 inches

Deep South

Avg. temperature = 81.5 degrees F.
Avg. rainfall = 3-4 inches

Texas

Avg. temperature = 86 degrees F.
Avg. rainfall = 2 inches

Source: *The Old Farmer's 1994 Almanac*

