

# TIME AFTER TIME

*Producers want cattle that will last a lifetime. Longevity is a trait that can be sought after today and predicted in future generations.*

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor*

Pointing to each female out grazing on the green grass, the typical Angus breeder can tell you the pedigree of every member of the herd. But it is not the young heifers, fresh from the latest auction, that make his voice boom with pride. It is the old cows, gray with age, that seem to secure the most interest from their caretaker.

For Angus breeders across the country, longevity is one of the traits capable of leading producers to success, says Stephen Miller, genetic research director of Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI).

Jerry Cassidy, director of member services at the American Angus Association, says, “Longevity would be defined as the age at which a cow dies or is removed from the herd.”

A recent study of seedstock and commercial Angus producers across the country revealed a majority of

cattlemen consider longevity to be one of the most important traits in their livestock.

Miller says longevity revolves around the idea of the producer choosing to cull the animal rather than the animal choosing to cull themselves. An animal will “cull themselves” by exhibiting bad feet, being open at pregnancy checks, prolapsing or possessing other characteristics that would inhibit productivity.

## Present predictions

While Cassidy says the Angus breed is always fairly well positioned in today’s seedstock and commercial sector, he encourages all Angus breeders to focus on longevity in the Angus female.

“Many of our seedstock producers do not value cow longevity as highly

as commercial producers do, and I feel this is due to the importance for the seedstock sector to continually emphasize the most current genetics possible in order to compete for market share,” Cassidy explains.

When ranchers consider the costs associated with heifer development or purchasing replacement females, Cassidy says longevity is a question of economic importance for all types of cattle operations. Keeping females for a longer time period can help lead a producer to both profit and success, he adds.

Miller says there are three areas a breeder should consider when prioritizing longevity — fertility, foot score and temperament. These areas are a vital component in determining how long an animal will stay in the herd because they are the three main reasons a female would be culled.



By placing emphasis on these three traits, Miller says producers can promote longevity for the future. Miller says cattlemen can look at heifer pregnancy, foot score and docility expected progeny differences (EPDs) to breed for or purchase the ideal animal.

To ease the process further, Miller suggests producers consider the combined index (\$C) or the maternal index (\$M). Miller says these indexes emphasize fertility, foot score and temperament. Both indexes are weighted with economic traits because they have an economic effect on longevity, he added.

## Future focus

In effort to promote longevity, the Association is currently working on developing a longevity EPD for Angus producers. Miller says AGI is working with a Ph.D. student to examine the culling codes currently collected by the Association. Culling codes are filled out by breeders and

submitted to the Association when a female is cut from the herd to identify why she was culled.

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— Stephen Miller

“The research is really about how you take those hundreds of thousands of data points with the culling codes and turn that into an EPD,” Miller explains.

Other breeds’ EPDs about longevity are known as “stayability” EPDs, but Miller says those genetic prediction tools do not take records of females each year. Rather he says they take a lump measurement of the total number of years a female is kept in the herd.

“Each of those years is a unique consideration — this is not just a yes or no process,” Miller says. “This new EPD will give credit for every year a female is kept in the herd rather than one overall record.”

Miller says stayability EPDs do not distinguish the reasoning behind why a cow was culled. AGI’s upcoming longevity EPD will break down the decisions behind the choice to cull a

female, which Miller says will create a more accurate heritability prediction.

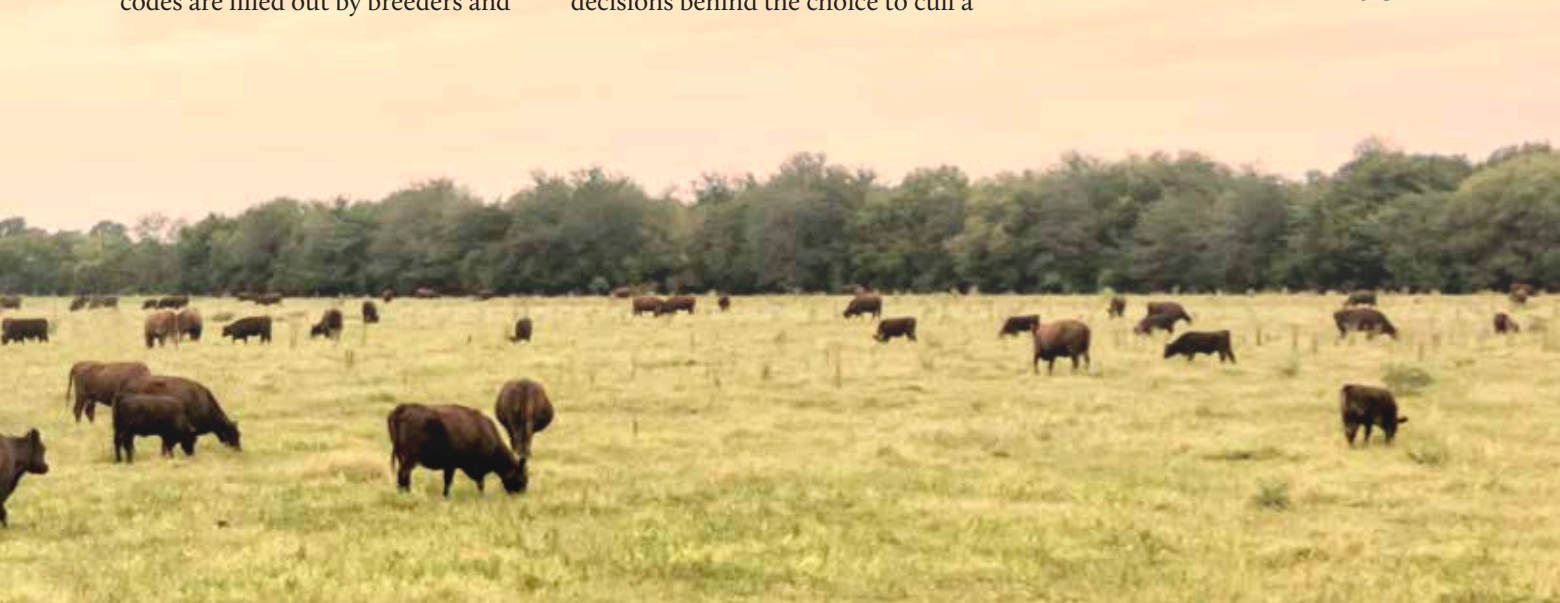
The first part of this project will finish up in September, but Miller says another year’s worth of research will be needed before the EPD can be released to Angus breeders. Producers will have to wait until September 2021 to begin utilizing this new genetic prediction tool.

## Production methods of a lifetime

Despite a year standing between Angus breeders and the new EPD, Miller says there are still several ways longevity can currently be promoted on an operation.

While Miller does suggest producers select and breed for those three previously mentioned traits related to longevity (fertility, structure and docility), he says the key to success is finding the balance in cow traits and carcass and performance traits. He says both sides of the equation possess importance, but producers have to learn to balance both sides of the production chain.

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“You want to put some emphasis on all traits,” he says. “I think if breeders don’t pay attention to those cow traits about longevity, they could run into problems down the road.”

To help find the balance, Miller says producers should engage in accurate recordkeeping. He says the recordkeeping process is vital. With accurate information submitted to the Association comes more accurate EPDs for further use, Miller adds.

To help ease the recordkeeping process, Cassady recommends

producers utilize the Association’s whole-herd recording program, MaternalPlus®. Cassady says this program allows Angus breeders to give the Association the exact data they need to help perfect new EPDs, such as the longevity EPD.

“The only way to develop an accurate selection tool for longevity is to have the necessary data to support the tool,” Cassady says.

To master the business behind the Angus breed, breeders need to be able to lean on their cattle year after

year, time after time. By searching for cattle possessing characteristics promoting longevity, producers will be able to proudly point out the same cows in their pasture for years to come. **A**

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**Historic Herds** *A Family Tradition Since 1898*

The advertisement features a young boy in a cowboy hat and plaid shirt on the right. In the center, there is a silhouette of a cow with a red heart outline. Below the cow silhouette is the text "Gray's Angus Harrison, NE 308-668-2525 grayangus@bbcwb.net graysangusranch.com". To the right of the cow silhouette is a document titled "GRAY BROS. ANGUS FARMS" with a picture of a black Angus cow. Below that is another document titled "Historic Herds" with the text "A Family Tradition Since 1898".