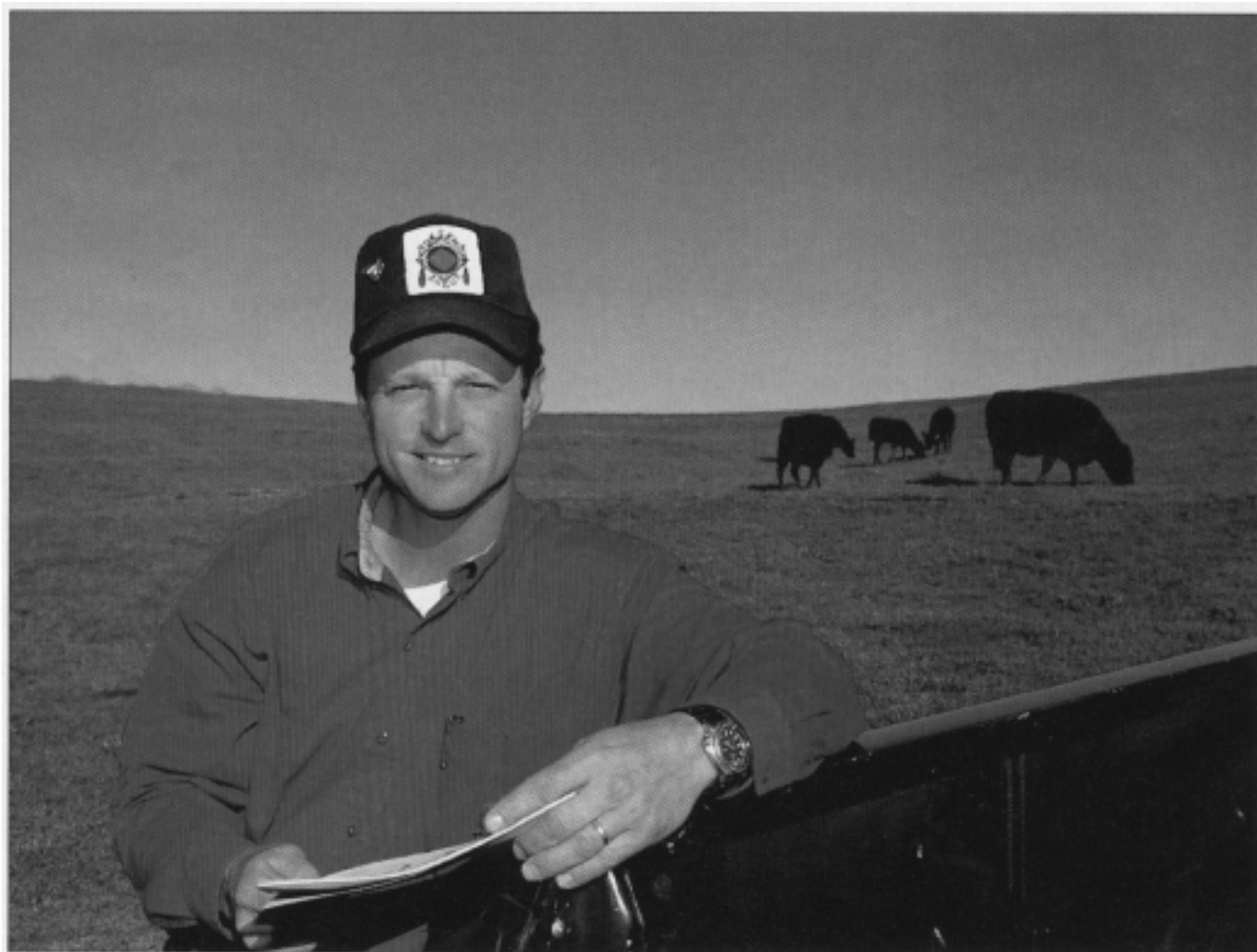


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South Carolina Angus breeder Neil McPhail and a neighboring Brangus breeder reap the benefits of a cooperative bull test and marketing program.

BY BECKY MILLS



Sharing a common goal, confidence and customer satisfaction has led South Carolina Angus breeder Neil McPhail to a successful joint marketing partnership.

In 1993 Angus breeder Neil McPhail had a jam-up crop of artificial inseminated (AI)-sired bull calves, a ready source of home-grown feed and the urge to start an on-farm bull test.

A full-time farmer, McPhail could squeeze out the time to keep the growing animals fed. Still, the Seneca, S.C. producer knew his limits. With his family's 90-cow registered herd, 80-cow commercial herd and his 40,000 broiler enterprise, there was no way he could keep up with the additional paperwork for a test and the following sale.

Plus, with only 20 to 25 bulls a year, McPhail had trouble justifying the economics of an on-farm test and sale.

Four miles down the road, Brangus breeders John and Patricia Spitzer also wanted to test their bulls on the farm. With fewer bulls than McPhail, however, they, too, knew it wouldn't pencil out.

Like McPhail, the Spitzers had a time/labor crunch. John Spitzer's more than full-time job as a Clemson University animal scientist already left many of the day-to-day cattle chores to wife Patricia, who also manages the family's broiler operation.

The answer was the Tokeena Angus & Spitzer Ranch Bull Test, followed by the Black Bull Sale, both headquartered at McPhail's operation.

"The two of us combined are large enough to make it feasible," says McPhail. "We utilize the strengths of each individual and complement each other to get the job done."

"Spitzer does the things I don't have time to do and can't do, and vice versa," says McPhail. "He does all the printing, the catalog and advertising. He sends out three newsletters to our main customers. I'd just as soon be here on the farm in the mud. We draw off each other's strengths."

The whole arrangement sounds deceptively simple.

In August, both sets of bulls are weaned and immediately go to McPhail's farm. There, they are co-mingled and go on an economical broiler litter/corn ration, formulated by Spitzer. In addition, they have access to rye and clover grazing.

The grazing and high roughage ration puts around 3 pounds per day gain on the young bulls.



This road sign advertises Tokeena Angus and Spitzer Ranch joint bull test and sale.

"We try to grow them and condition them, but not get them fat," McPhail says.

The growing bulls are weighed every 28 days, through a 168-day test ending in January. Between the end of the test and the sale, traditionally the last Saturday in February, the bulls are given a breeding soundness evaluation and complete health checkup.

The bulls performance information and expected progeny differences (EPDs) are calculated and printed in the sale catalog.

Sale day is as uncomplicated as possible. The bulls are penned by price and sold by silent auction.

The sale is a family affair. Patricia Spitzer and Gwen McPhail, Neil's wife, clerk the sale. Steve, Neil's brother and partner in the cattle operation, auctions the bulls and pitches in wherever he is needed. Floyd, the family row crop specialist, doubles as cook on sale day.

While McPhail and Spitzer make the test and sale look easy, make no mistake — the undertaking gobbles up huge chunks of time.

"It's a struggle," McPhail says. "On my end, it's every day. Something has to be tended to. Mixing and preparing the feed takes one day a week Spitzer has to put out the newsletters, catalog and put the advertisements together."

While having two different breeds of bulls could also be an issue, the two don't let it.

"If I was selling with another Angus breeder, I'd be competing head to head with him," says McPhail. "Nine times out of 10, when a buyer pulls up, he knows whether he is going to buy an Angus or a Brangus."

University of Georgia animal scientist Ronnie Silcox agrees. He notes that three different breeds are marketed at the annual University sale.

"There is more competition between individuals within the same breed than between breeds," says Silcox. "Most commercial producers should be crossbreeding and probably are. They don't need the same breed year after year."

Spitzer adds, "We've got to quit this 'my breed is better than your breed' mentality and work together."

Both producers say the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

First on the list is merchandising.

"You bring people to your farm," says McPhail. "There are times we have sold heifers and pairs because the people were here. We sold a whole load of commercial heifers last year because the people came to look at the bulls."

"If you test at a central test station, you build recognition for the central test," says

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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The on-farm bull test and sale draws customers for Tokeena Angus females, too.

Spitzer. “If you test at home it builds name recognition for your herd, not only bulls, but females, too.”

Testing the entire bull crop from an operation also increases the accuracy of the ever-important production data.

“The ratios are a lot more meaningful: says Spitzer. “The data we get back is a lot more useful — it helps us evaluate where we are in our programs and provides more data to our respective breed associations for valid EPD calculations.”

These cattlemen have found a slight economic advantage to conducting their own test and sale versus consigning to a central bull test. McPhail supplies the feed, while Spitzer picks up the costs connected with promotion. They divvy up after the sale on a per bull basis.

“It splits the burden of the finances,” says McPhail. “We’ve never had to pay each other over \$500 or \$600.”

“Cost is probably an advantage, but not a great one,” adds Spitzer. “When you add

bull tests build name
recognition for your herd
— on-farm
— bulls as well as females.

the total costs for the sale feeding people, the porta-potties and this past year, the cost of the grain, we were only a little cheaper.”

If you’re convinced that partnering on an on-farm bull test and sale is a workable idea, be forewarned — it takes more than bulls, facilities, feed and a cattle-producing neighbor.

“You have to have a common goal,” says McPhail. “You have to have confidence in each other’s ability.”

“Trust. Communication,” adds Spitzer. “You also need a division of labor so everybody feels they are contributing.”

Crucial, too, is the art of compromise.

“We’re both pretty hardheaded,” admits McPhail. “We have to sit down and discuss our different ideas.”

“We argue over some things, but we resolve them and go on,” says Spitzer. “We’ve adapted and changed on both sides.”

