

Breeders with Vision

Those collecting carcass data and selecting bulls using carcass EPDs are preparing for a value-based beef industry.

by ANGIE STUMP

Predicting, planning and preparing for the future – evaluating bulls for carcass merit is the wave of the future and Angus breeders are moving to the head of the pack.

The beef industry as a whole, not just the cow-calf producer, is beginning to recognize the tremendous value of knowing what a calf will do on the rail.

Expected progeny differences (EPDs) for carcass merit are not new to the Angus breed. They were first published in 1974.

John Crouch, director of performance programs for the American Angus Association, says that from 1974 to 1987 little attention was given to the carcass EPDs. "Then producers realized that we are in the meat business and started paying attention to end product merit," he says.

Today breeders are beginning to select for carcass merit. Progressive breeders who are looking at carcass EPDs see the need for increased value placed on carcass data in preparing for a value-based market.

"We hear a lot of talk about carcass EPDs," says Doug Prank, manager of beef sire acquisition and administration for American Breeders Service (ABS). "They are used as a second tool today."

When looking for good carcass EPD bulls, breeders require positive numbers in marbling and ribeye area. Paying attention to accuracy levels is important when comparing bulls. Crouch says a bull with .6 accuracy or better is very reliable.

Progressive breeders have yet to fully benefit from their dedication to improving carcass merit.

"Right now carcass traits are not being paid for," says Jim Shirley, Angus regional manager, Brookings, SD. "But these breeders are preparing for the future."

Taking the time and effort to collect carcass data can be an advantage when marketing cattle. "If the numbers collected are positive they can cause a positive motivational force to buy," he says.

Crouch says carcass EPDs, in addition to reproduction, early growth and maternal traits, add value to the total package. If the beef industry wants to continue to compete in the marketplace with other protein sources, the end product merit will become more important.

Prank adds economics are going to dictate the use of carcass EPDs and that right now the use of performance EPDs are more economical. "When the industry becomes value based," he explains, "it will be more rewarding to breeders to select for carcass EPDs."

Although carcass merit may not be as important as fertility and growth, when other traits are in balance the level of carcass merit and composition can be raised.

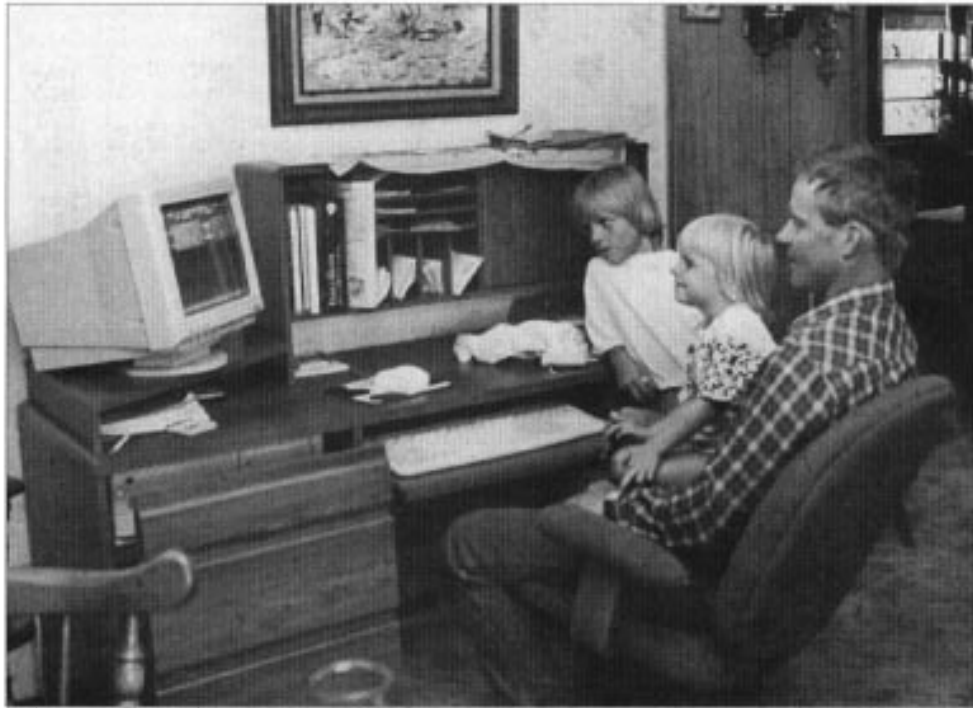
"Two things will determine the use of carcass EPDs," Prank says, "economic reward and the kind of bulls that are available with a combination of performance and carcass traits."

Breeders must be willing to make tradeoffs because finding the total package of both positive performance and carcass merit is not easy today. As carcass merit is consistently selected for, more bulls will be found that fit the demand and more Angus breeders will be prepared for the future.

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Extra Effort Pays Off for Brooks Angus Ranch



A family business. Steve Brooks and his daughters, Skeeter and Cassi, view their cattle records on their computer. Steve and his wife, April, update their cattle records every six months using the Managing Partner computer program.

Dedicated to the collection and evaluation of carcass data, Steve Brooks and Brooks Angus Ranch are preparing for the future.

"In the long term, the collection of carcass data will really pay off," Steve says. "If the industry wants to compete with chicken and pork we must work toward greater customer satisfaction."

Steve believes that carcass EPDs will hold merit in the

future and that breeders will be paid a premium for carcass merit. "As we increase market share and become more value based there will be a payoff for those who use carcass EPDs," he says.

Brooks Angus Ranch has 400 head of registered Angus, 400 head of commercial Angus cows and 180 replacement females.

The ranch is a family affair, Steve and his wife,

April, and their three daughters, Callie, Cassi and Skeeter, manage the registered herd. Steve's cousin, Rob, manages the commercial cattle and Steve's brother, Ryan, is in charge of the farming operation.

Steve's dad, Wayne, started collecting carcass data 20 years ago when the U.S. Department of Agriculture developed tags for progressive cattle producers to use. By

using these tags a producer was guaranteed to receive carcass data back from the packer, no matter where the steers were slaughtered.

Collecting carcass data has helped the Brooks in selling and marketing their cattle. At their annual production sale this past April, 70 percent of the bulls they sold had interim carcass EPDs.

A bull buyer told Steve that commercial cattle producers are going to demand their bull supplier develop lines within their cattle for carcass merit. If a buyer does not collect and have the data available then they are going to buy bulls where they can get the information.

"I think any purebred breeder who is not collecting carcass data better get going," Steve says.

The theory at Brooks Angus Ranch is that carcass traits can be blended into a breeding program without sacrificing the important performance traits needed in a cow herd. They collect carcass data in order to prove their own bulls and other AI sires they use for carcass merit.

"We are trying to get good genetics in our cattle as quick as we can," Steve says. They have stacked their pedigrees for growth and milk, and are now working on birth weight and carcass traits. He says it's tough to find bulls with a combination of the traits needed and wanted today.

They try to keep their cow herd young in order to keep improving the genetics of their herd with constant turnover. The average age of Brooks' cows this spring was 4.1 years.

Until this year the Brooks Family has been selling steers on contract with the stipulation of knowing where they will be slaughtered in order to collect carcass data.

Steve decided this year to retain ownership because of his frustration with

inconsistent information

In retaining ownership for the first time in more than six years, they entered 140 steers in the Angus Alliance

Program.

"I think the Alliance is a great program," Steve says. "The best thing about it is getting the steers slaughtered without over or under feeding. In past years I think they had been feeding our cattle longer than they needed."

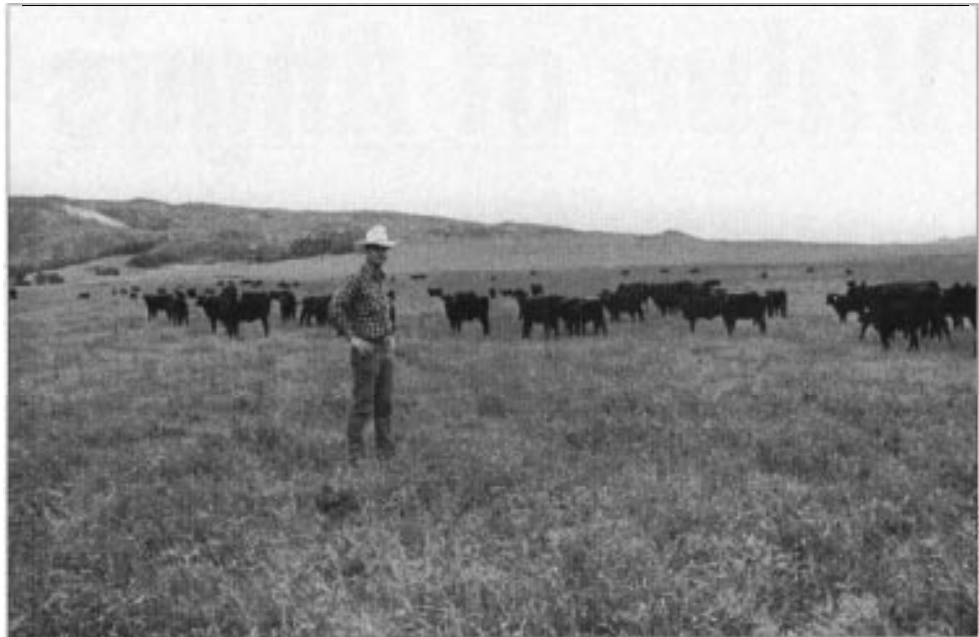
On May 1, 100 of Brooks steers had been slaughtered with 70 percent grading Choice. In previous years their steers had not been processed till July with 88 to 92 percent grading Choice but they were discounted because of higher yield grades.

Steve believes that the Alliance is where the future is going, with packers paying a premium for the right kind of cattle. He believes it is a step in the right direction for the Angus and beef industries.

Steve says his only concern with the program was that they split some contemporary groups when ultrasound was done on the steers. Some of the data was no good because the reference sire's and test sires' offspring were not slaughtered at the same time.

Another project Steve assisted with was the organization of the Badlands Steer Test. The goal of the test was to obtain carcass data for commercial producers in the area. He believes commercial producers learned from the experience and are now able to better market their calves and understand how genetics can affect the end product.

Steve says carcass traits will be very important down the road, especially as the industry moves more towards branded beef in order to improve consumer satisfaction and demand.



Brooks Angus Ranch, Bowman, ND, is located at the edge of the Badlands. Their registered cow herd grazes the buttes and valleys of southwestern North Dakota.

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