



Page Anderson, Three Forks, Mont., is building an Angus-based herd. His program goal is to replace a large part of the less efficient cows each year with heifers that carry improved genetics.

COMMERCIAL PRODUCER PROFILE

'DON'T' SKIMP ON GENETICS'

The CA Ranch in Montana uses only proven, balanced EPD Angus bulls.

BY KEITH EVANS

"Genetics is the best bargain in the cattle business. Skimping doesn't pay."

Speaking is Page Anderson who runs some 1,900 cows on the family owned CA Ranch near Three Forks, Mont. Anderson took over management of the ranch five years ago. He has made a number of changes, most of them involving improvement in the quality and performance of the herd through improved genetics and careful female selection.

One of the first moves was to breed all the heifers artificially to low birth weight, balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs) bulls. He didn't like the idea of breeding the heifers to "heifer bulls," which he said were fairly expensive, and often lacked

growth and milk. And sometimes, because of their low accuracy, they didn't always produce easy calving.

This year CA Ranch bred 480 heifers artificially, all to Angus bulls with EPDs of plus two pounds or less for birth weight, plus 25 pounds for weaning and plus 50 or so for yearling weight with a plus 10 for milk. Eventually between 80 to 90 of the best heifers from this group will go back into the herd.

“Our cow herd was fairly old five years ago, and we needed to replace a lot of cows,” Anderson says. “Our first-calf heifers couldn't produce all the replacements we needed. I was worried about getting all our replacements from the heifers.” This spurred him to put more emphasis on bull selection for use on the remainder of the cows which we all bred naturally.

“We have been spending more money on bulls the last few years, and as a result we are getting better replacement heifers: he says. Today about 20 percent of the replacements come from the first-calf heifers; the rest are naturally sired from the older cows.”

As it turns out, Anderson now buys bulls with much the same EPDs as the AI sires he uses on the heifers. “We don't have calving problems in our mature cows, but because birth weight is often correlated to mature size we like bulls with around plus two pounds for birth weight.” In addition he looks for milk in the plus 10 pounds range, with plus 25 to 30 pounds on weaning weight and plus 50 pounds or so on yearling. “Balance is our main philosophy,” Anderson says.

For the past few years Anderson has been using virtually all registered Angus



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bulls in the herd. The only animals that aren't bred to Angus is a small, one-bull straightbred commercial Hereford herd.

“Five years ago we had a basically three-way cross (Hereford-Angus-Shorthorn) cow herd,” Anderson says. “Then we started keeping only Angus and black baldie replacement heifers, and breeding them to registered Angus. We settled on Angus because the breed has a broader base of genetics and better EPD accuracy. This allows us to do what we want to do.”

What Anderson wants to do is eventually have a herd of cows whose calves will all grade USDA Choice, Yield Grade 2 or leaner. “Roughly 25 percent of our retained ownership calves do this

today, so we know it can be done,” Anderson says. He figures it is a matter of careful bull and replacement heifer selection.

The ranch has retained ownership on about half the cattle for the past few years. The main goal is to get both feedlot and carcass information. In addition Anderson has participated in the Certified Angus Beef Value Discovery Project, and just this past year put a group of steers in the Angus Alliance program.

“For 30 years we have been breeding cattle without a clue as to what we were producing, and we figure it's time to change all that. We want carcass information to form a baseline so we will be able to make improvement and track it,” Anderson says.

CA Ranch is just beginning

to develop a computer records program. They now tag all calves from first-calf heifers and three-year-old cows. It will be some time before they can identify individual cow production. But that is in the future.

In the meantime, they are building a base of information on the herd, both in feedlot performance and carcass. But it is difficult to get carcass information. That's why Anderson signed up for the Angus Alliance last year. He likes the idea of trying to identify when cattle are ready to market as individuals, rather than selling an entire pen on average.

Partial results of the Angus Alliance cattle show that the bulk of the cattle are grading USDA Choice, Yield

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Grades 2 and 3. There are a few Selects, and on the other end a few are qualifying for the Certified Angus Beef Program premium.

"Over the past few years most of our cattle graded 75 to 80 percent Choice and the rest Select, with no Standards," Anderson says.

Retaining ownership on the cattle hasn't been a real money maker the last few years, according to Anderson, not when calves were selling for \$1 per pound. But that could change with the current market conditions.

"We are happy with retained ownership if we break even and are able to collect the feedlot and carcass date," he says.

The CA Ranch was put together in the 1930s. Page Anderson's parents, Buck and Marcia, acquired it in 1959. At that time it was a straightbred Hereford commercial herd. Buck Anderson is still active in the management of the operation. Marcia, a retired medical doctor, is a Quarter Horse breeder, and has produced many horses used on the ranch.

The Andersons have four children. Page, (interviewed for this article) who began managing the ranch in 1990; Frank, who manages the ranch's hunting, outfitting fishing and timber operation; Kathy, who is now taking over the office and bookkeeping from her father; and Anita, who, though not active on the ranch, is a horse breeder and trainer in the Bozeman area.

Another key person in the ranching operation is Ray Shively, the cow foreman. Shively has been instrumental in getting the AI program off the ground, Page Anderson says, and he has done much of the bull selection footwork, visiting ranches and identifying outstanding sires.

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Colorado and Kansas. Their experience has shown that not only is marbling important, but the cattle can also use more muscling too. There is also more variability in the cattle than they like.

"We don't want to get into



These heifers carry the individual identification ear tags that will be used to set up a computer records program. The goal is to eventually keep individual records of production on the entire 1,900 head cow herd at CA Ranch.

seven days after they come off the MGA, heifers go through a false heat period. From that point on they are heat detected and bred artificially one time. About 70 percent are settled artificially before the bulls are turned in. Anderson wants the heifers to weigh around 800 pounds at breeding time.

Calves are weaned in October. The average weight from all 1,900 cows last year was 540 pounds. All the calves are kept on the ranch for 45 days after weaning for backgrounding and pre-conditioning. Anderson basically uses the Tex-Vac program developed by Texas A&M University,

"We have found that the A&M research is correct," Anderson says. "It takes 45 days of backgrounding for a

where they are fed hay haylage (alfalfa and beardless barley/peas) and grain. "We are not in corn country, but we buy and feed a little corn, so the calves will be accustomed to eating it when they get to the feedlot," Anderson says.

After backgrounding the calves are sorted by weight. The ranch retains and feeds 400 of the heaviest calves, those weighing from 620 to 700 pounds after the 45 day backgrounding period. Calves that weigh from 550 to 620 pounds are sold as feeders, and the lighter end (those under 550 pounds) are kept at the ranch and sold later as yearling feeders.

The Andersons have fed their retained ownership cattle at various feedlots in Oklahoma, Nebraska,

single trait selection for marbling or any other trait for that matter." Anderson says.

He plans to maintain, and even improve the herd's maternal traits, while continuing to work on uniformity carcass quality and muscling. It's a complicated process that can't be changed in just a few generations. But with improved records, top quality genetics, and good, sound management, Page Anderson is moving past the time when they "hadn't a clue as to what we were producing" to a planned program to satisfy beef consumers and even attract new ones.

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