

O V E R C O M E T H E OBSTACLE

BY CHRISTY COUCH

in Stillwater, Okla., says Dolezal.

"We feed approximately 1,000 bulls a year, and have done that consistently for the last four years," she says. About 80% of those bulls are Angus.

"We provide a lot of different kinds of services," she adds. "We're not trying to replace National Cattle Evaluations (NCEs)."

According to Dolezal most breeders who send bulls to OBI are strong supporters of NCE and use the bull test data to supplement their performance program.

To stay on top in the cattle industry ranchers must continually improve their herds. Not knowing a herd's current performance level poses a tough obstacle to improvement. One way to overcome the obstacle is to,

utilize a central bull test.

The information gained from testing a bull at a central test station can benefit commercial producers and seedstock producers alike, says Sally Dolezal, Oklahoma State University Extension beef cattle breeding specialist. "In

order to make genetic change in a desired direction, you have to know the current performance level of your herd. Performance information is a necessity."

Angus breeders are taking advantage of this information at Oklahoma Beef Inc. (OBI)

Central-test bull sales open doors to commercial marketing of purebred cattle, says Sally Dolezal, Oklahoma State University Extension beef cattle breeding specialist. "Over 90 percent of bulls we sell, and we sell 400 to 500 bulls, go to commercial herds."



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Breeder perspective

Jerry and Ada Pfeiffer are the fourth generation to manage Pfeiffer Farms in Orlando, Okla. They have placed bulls in the OBI tests since 1982.

Jerry says important information can be learned from placing bulls in bull tests.

"All cattle are worth one thing — how much beef they'll hang up," he says. "Through bull test stations, we've been shown how fast we can convert grain into beef."

The genetic information from bull tests benefits all cattlemen involved, says Ada. It's not just the bull buyers who need that information to make decisions, she adds.

"But some buyers don't have anywhere else to get it," she continues. "There are lots of things we know, and we take for granted they know." That information is provided on the sale offerings of a bull test.

Jerry says testing bulls has improved his products at the ranch.

"We can produce a predictable product that is consistent time and again," he says. "Through feeding at OBI, the longer we fed, the more predictable we got.

"We were able to feed a volume of bulls out of proven sires," he continues. "There are the same environments, feeding opportunities, et cetera. All these things are real assets and continue to improve your product to get what you want."

The costs

"The thing test stations have to think about is cost," Jerry says. "They could shorten up the days on feed to 80 days instead of 112. My concern on 112 or 140 is the bulls gain too fast, and it takes too long to come back down."

Dolezal explains that the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) recommends a minimum length of 112 days for a central bull test. She also says the average cost of testing a bull at OBI is about \$500-\$550. The sale expenses are dependent on the size of the sale.



A bull is tested at a central test for a variety of traits, says Kern Hendrix, secretary and treasurer of the Indiana Beef Evaluation Program and Purdue University Extension beef specialist (not pictured). Bulls are evaluated for weight per day of age, daily gain and breeding soundness, and they are screened for structural soundness and disposition.

Testing a bull at the Indiana Beef Evaluation Program (IBEP) costs about \$500, with sale expenses at about \$100/head, says Kern Hendrix, IBEP secretary and treasurer and Purdue University Extension beef specialist. For that price producers get considerable information and marketing opportunities.

A bull is tested at a central test for a variety of traits, Hendrix says. "Bulls are evaluated at the end of the test — not only for weight per day of age, but for daily gain — to

develop a testing index. They're also evaluated for breeding soundness and are screened for structural soundness and disposition."

The performance information from the test can be used to compare bulls for performance traits, Hendrix says. "What a central test does is allow bulls from a number of breeders to be evaluated with bulls in similar situations. It gives the breeder a better feel or guide as to how their bull performs against others in the same conditions."

Producers also can use the information to compare their own sires' traits, adds Hendrix. "They can compare bulls within their own herd. A number of breeders bring in three to 10 bulls for a given test."

William Herring, University of Missouri (MU) assistant professor of breeding and genetics, says producers should take advantage of comparisons of bulls in their herds.

"The best situation for any producer is to test all of their bulls," he says. "They need to stay together and test together

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through weaning. The best way to do it is to test all bulls."

A marketing tool

Central test stations can provide more than postweaning gain information for producers, according to Dolezal. "OBI

serves as a center for bringing the buyer and seller together.

"It provides quality assurance and breeder integrity," she says, by providing information that can be used for good decision-making.

"It's also good for those who've just gotten into the business," she continues. "They can learn a lot from watching the old guard."

The visibility can be especially important to a small producer, says Dolezal. "It works well for a breeder who feeds a few bulls and can use it as a marketing tool."

Testing bulls in a central test station can get a producer's name out into the industry, says Hendrix. "It may give them an additional marketing tool or outlet that they may not have had elsewhere."

The publicity gained from using a central test is no substitute for an effective total program, says Dolezal. "You have to have a strong performance program at home." A bull test is one branch of that program.

"We have a variety of breeders from large seedstock producers to small ones," says Hendrix. "We hope they will utilize the data they obtain from the test to . . . improve their breeding programs at home."

Buyer perspective

Roy Sparks of Sparks Farms, which maintains offices in Oklahoma City, says buying bulls from test stations like OBI has provided his cow-calf operation with many benefits.



Roy Sparks, Oklahoma City, says there are many benefits — genetic information, value and convenience — to buying bulls from performance bull tests such as Oklahoma Beef Inc. (OBI).

The genetic information provided at these bull sales has been one reason he has purchased bulls from OBI since the mid-1980s. "The first thing you have is the numbers in front of you," he says. "To find that they have the Angus bulls that have the genetics behind them is very important."

Value is another benefit that brought Sparks to test sales.

"I don't know where you can go anywhere for the quality vs. value," he says about OBI. "I think you'd have to go a long way to find that kind of quality bull."

Convenience is also an advantage. "We don't have the time to go to several sales," he

explains. "I go to one sale and buy a quantity of bulls."

Test stations must be accurate and informative, says Sparks, explaining what he expects out of test management. "I guess test stations should just make sure all the statistics are good that they give us. They also need to keep producers informed of what they are doing."

Making the cut

The top 70% of bulls on test, based on performance data, are eligible for OBI's semi-annual sale. The top 67% are selected for IBEP sales.

Dolezal says a producer, if deciding to enter his qualifying bull in the sale, can market his

program through these sales. "You can establish nice credibility through bull sales like OBI's. That is a snapshot of the bull program run at home. It's a slice of the pie."

A bull tested at a central test also more easily marketed at the ranch, she says. "When you have a bull fed at OBI, it is an OBI bull. You can then sell it through a private sale as an OBI bull."

Dolezal says central-test bull sales also open doors to commercial marketing of purebred cattle. "Our 90 percent of bulls we sell, and we sell 400 to 500 bulls, go to commercial herds," she says. "You have access to this market through OBI."

Central tests are not just a race for the biggest bull, Dolezal stresses. "The bull that gains the most isn't exactly the bull everyone needs. We're not just chasing the highest-gaming, tallest, largest-framed bull."

Hendrix agrees. "We look at other things such as EPDs [expected progeny differences], frame score and carcass traits (ribeye area, backfat and marbling). People are looking more and more for bulls with balanced traits," says Hendrix. "Buyers are looking at a lot of different things."

Because preweaning environments of bulls in tests are often very different, it is unfair to rank bulls by weight gain only, says Herring. Bulls from different environments are like "apples and orange" and should be evaluated for other traits such as EPDs.

Editor's note: For a list of central bull test stations see page 468 of the March 1998 *Angus Journal* or contact your local Extension specialist.