

PART-TIME HERD,



North Carolina Angus breeder J.F. Lancaster manages a herd of 70 cows.

FULL-TIME PROGRESS

AI is top priority at Ann Angus Farm.

by Beck Mills

LIKE MANY ANGUS BREEDERS, J.F. Lancaster has a full-time, off farm job. But what a job. As district chief over three fire stations, he works a 24-hour on, 24-hour off shift for a total of 56 hours a week.

But it doesn't end there. With wife Carolyn and son Jeff, he also farms 62 acres of labor intensive tobacco, 250 acres of cotton, and 30 acres of soybeans.

The Rocky Mount, N.C., Angus breeder/fire fighter/farmer doesn't let his schedule interfere with the genetic progress of the 70 cow herd — especially when it comes to artificial insemination (AI).

"If you're going to be in the seedstock business, you have to provide the best," says Lancaster. "That is the only way I know to do it."

The Lancasters saw the quality advantage of AI when they started using it on their commercial herd in 1983. It was a natural choice for their mostly home grown Angus herd, which began in 1981 with one registered cow.

Now, the biggest hurdle to AI at Ann Angus Farm is trying to convince the cows to conform to J.F.'s work schedule. Thankfully, Syncro-Mate B®, (SMB) a synchronization regime, as well as J.F.'s carefully hoarded vacation days, make it possible.

"If the cattle are in good shape, Syncro-Mate B works real well," says Lancaster.

Their numbers prove it. In 1995, their homebred clean up bulls only bred four cows and heifers out of 50. In '96, using a combination of SMB and natural heats, the Lancasters bred 61 cows AI.



A uniform set of weaned calves at Ann Angus Farm.



J.F. and Carolyn Lancaster share cow herd recordkeeping duties. They are committed to an AI program using top quality sires.

Virginia Tech reproductive physiologist Bill Beal says SMB is the answer for operations like the Lancasters. "The greatest advantage is the tight synchronization of estrus that follows the removal of the implant," says the animal scientist.

"The second biggest advantage is it induces estrus in some non-cycling cows and heifers — the jump start effect," he adds. "With a mixed herd of post partum cows (those that have calved at different times), a higher percentage of cows will exhibit synchronized estrus with SMB than with any other synchronization regime."

The Lancasters traditionally begin their carefully orchestrated breeding season on Dec. 23, when they run the cows and heifers through the chute and insert the SMB implants. On Jan. 1 they remove the implants and give the prostaglandin injection.

Then the fun begins. "The majority of them come in heat the third day after we pull the implant" says Lancaster. "We live with them. The first day they are due to come in heat, we stay with them all day. We also spend most of the night over there."

He adds, "Timing is critical. If you don't catch her in heat, you're not going to get her bred."

At the very least, they check heat first thing in the morning, at lunch, late in the afternoon, and at bedtime.

They don't let the combination of black cattle and the dark keep them from heat checking, either. They have lights at the breeding pen, spotlights on their trucks, and an ample

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supply of powerful flashlights. The cattle are also freeze branded, making night time identification easier.

In addition, they paint the tailheads of the animals when they pull the implants. If the cows have been ridden during the night, the paint will be smeared.

When J.F. and Carolyn heat check, they use index cards to write down the numbers of every cow and heifer that comes in standing heat, as well as the time. Since Jeff now does the majority of actual AI breeding, it helps him keep track of which cows to breed and when.

J.F. also eased the logistical challenges with a \$300 used truck body turned field office. Since the breeding shed is in a remote pasture, he moved the truck body right next to the breeding chute and equipped it with lights, a desk, small refrigerator, AI tank and breeding charts.

If it all sounds like an awful lot of work, it is. Unfortunately, it goes with the territory of AI, especially when a synchronization program is used.

"The No. 1 disadvantage to SMB is the labor associated with it," Beal says. "You have to work them twice and catch their heads to insert and remove the implants. It increases the labor dramatically."

"You have to be committed," emphasizes Lancaster.

No doubt, he is. He literally gives his life blood for the chore. In Rocky Mount, fire fighters are rewarded with an extra two hours of vacation time for every pint of blood they donate, so J.F. donates regularly for the needed time off during breeding season.

He says it's more than worth it. "With the genetics and the use of expected progeny differences, you can change a herd a lot quicker. We've seen it in our own herd."

In 1983 the Lancasters had a 567-pound weaning weight average on their commercial herd. In '95, without the benefit of the hybrid vigor from crossbreeding, the weaning weight on their 40 purebred Angus calves was 631 pounds. In '96, a severe drought only pulled the weaning weights on 50 calves down to 602 pounds.

The Lancasters so strongly believe in AI they sell the handful of steers and heifers sired by cleanup bulls as commercial cattle.

Weaning weights only tell part of the story on the North Carolina farm. Their AI

sired bull calves are finishing at or near the top in the state central bull tests, particularly in the low birth weight divisions.

"We're where we need to be on milk, weaning weights and yearling weights," Lancaster says.

Now he is fine tuning. "We've gone to more calving ease sires," he says. "We need to get them down to a more functional size and thicken them up. There are some good calving ease bulls that can do that."

To reach his goals, Lancaster is using AI sires like Precision and Fullback. "I like the Precision heifers and I really like the Fullback calves," he says.

The semen inventory also includes Ambush, 2RT2, EXT and Sleep Easy.

Although the Lancasters invest a great deal of time and effort into their AI program, the use of these top quality sires doesn't break their budget.

The SMB program averages \$5 per dose, while semen costs run around \$20 to \$30 a straw.

Edgecombe County Extension agent and cattleman Ralph Blalock says the Lancasters have an excellent return on their investment.

"They have as good of black cows as there are east of the Mississippi," Blalock says.

