

Performance bull testing and sales have always been great tools for adding value and visibility to breeding programs. But they are increasingly providing Angus and commercial operators with more measurable performance data, which can only lead to more consistent genetic packages that benefit the beef industry in the long run.

“We are mainly interested in impacting the programs of purebred breeders and what commercial producers demand,” says Dave Seibert, University of Illinois Extension animal systems educator, East Peoria. “If we can do this, it can have a compounding effect on the performance and composition of the beef cattle industry — not just through the few bulls that breeders sell in our sale, but through the replacement heifers they put back into their herds and the bulls they sell to commercial producers.”

Bud Hobbs, Hobbs Angus, Good Hope, Ill., has seen the benefits of performance testing and sales. He participates in the Illinois Performance-Tested (IPT) Bull Sale, which is coordinated by Seibert. He also markets bulls through a sale he holds at a local auction barn and through Lamoine Valley Angus Association sales.

“We have participated in performance testing for a number of years and have found it to be a good promotional tool for us,” Hobbs says. “If we have a top-indexing bull, I can promote that when I sell all of my bulls. Commercial producers are also usually willing to give a little extra for bulls that have good EPDs (expected progeny differences) and performance data.”

In the 35-year history of the IPT sale, more than 3,500 bulls have brought value to breeding programs, with an average sale price of \$1,503 per bull. The success, Seibert says, comes because the sale advisory committee has been quick to add performance measurements to the program.

Such accomplishments include adding frame scores and utilizing a frame score window; taking scrotal circumference and pelvic measurements and setting minimums; establishing acceptable EPD index levels for the sale; requiring complete EPD information from breed associations to be eligible for sale; providing EPD group rankings for growth, maternal, carcass and reproductive traits; providing an EPD index based on economic traits; and

Value & Visibility

Performance bull testing can provide both.

by **Barb Baylor Anderson**

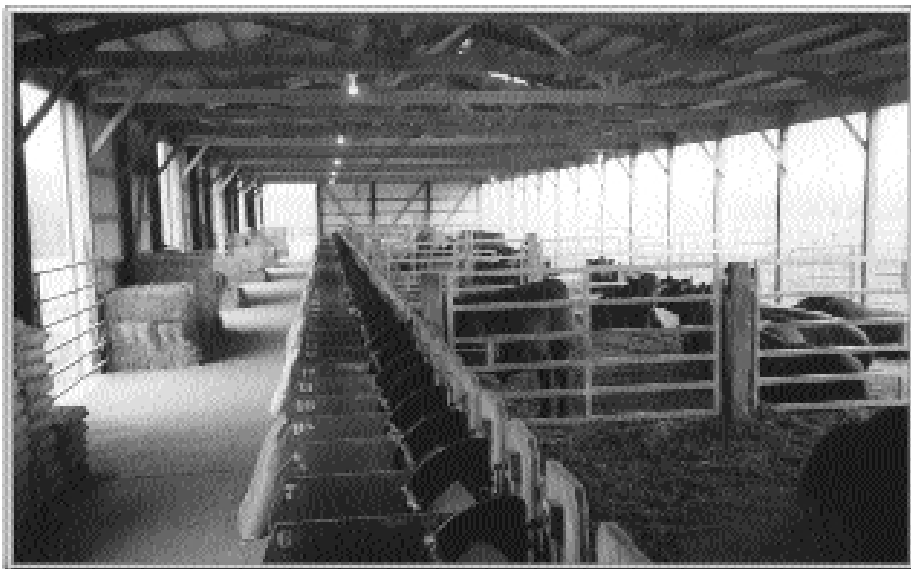


PHOTO COURTESY OF DEE WOODY, SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

► Test stations provide a neutral ground where breeders get a chance to compare their bulls against other bulls from their breed on the same feed,” says Dee Woody, supervisor of Southern Illinois University Beef Evaluation Station, Carbondale.

basing EPD index scores on all phases of production.

“When Angus bulls had a tremendous spread in frame scores a few years ago, for example, we placed windows on the scores. Some people dropped out because of that, but it helped add value for those who stayed with us,” Seibert says. “When we began to emphasize EPDs in partnership with the breed associations, we found that to be one of the best ways to add value and produce more consistency.”

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On-farm testing success

Bulls eligible for the IPT sale are tested on-farm, which Seibert says allows producers to keep their own contemporary groups of bulls together — groups that are

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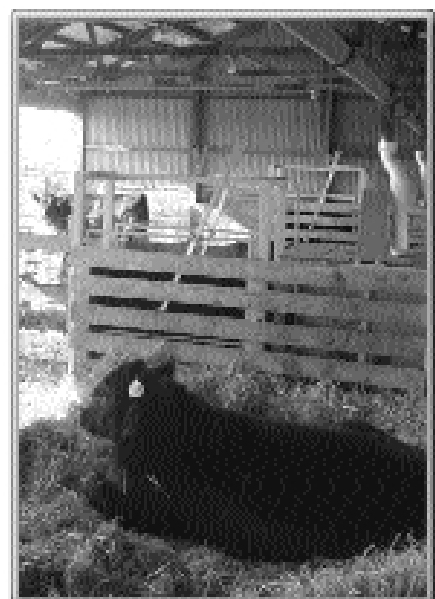


PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN CARLSON, WESTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

► A Pinpointer feeding system is used at the Western Illinois University Bull Testing Program, Macomb, to measure individual feed consumption.

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about the same age that have been managed under similar practices. Data is processed through the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program from the American Angus Association, and includes birth, weaning and yearling weights, carcass data, and ultrasound measurements of Angus cattle submitted by members. The Association also tracks EPDs, which allows Angus producers to compare the ranking of each of their animals to that of others in the database. The analysis uses differences expressed between animals within a herd to formulate predictions for comparison.

“Association performance and sire evaluation records allow producers to compare their bulls against the total population of the breed,” Seibert explains.

“The EPD percentile ranking of important traits that we use is developed from how each of our tested bulls ranks against others, whether they are in Illinois or another state.”

Seibert appreciates the on-farm bull testing approach because it allows producers to build performance databases for their own herds. “When we first started working with producers, most just wanted to measure and weigh their top few calves. As time progressed, they started weighing the calf crop and placing them in contemporary groups,” he says. “Now performance-

based producers keep contemporary groups together so they can build herd data and obtain more complete performance information on their herds.”

Station options

Bull test stations are another effective approach for adding value and visibility to performance programs and helping provide consistent genetics to commercial cattle operations. Bulls from different producers are brought to stations for warm-up periods of about two weeks. The bulls are then kept in controlled environments for more than three months so such performance as average daily gain (ADG) can be measured and used with other data collected.

“Test stations provide a neutral ground

where breeders get a chance to compare their bulls against other bulls from their breed on the same feed,” says Dee Woody, supervisor of Southern Illinois University Beef Evaluation Station, Carbondale. “You can usually find a test station close to home, but we also have several out-of-state breeders who want to expand their marketing horizons either through our sale or at home, based on station performance.”

John Evans, coordinator of Oklahoma Beef Inc. (OBI), shares a similar philosophy. OBI, a central bull test station operated by seedstock breeders and the Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service, is the second-largest bull testing station in the United States.

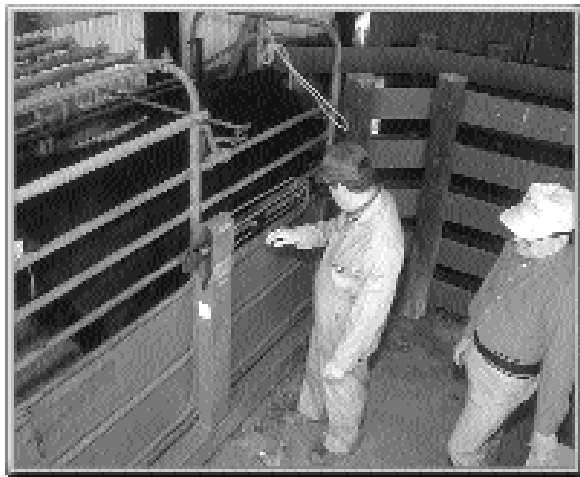
“In addition to increased visibility for your program, using a test station allows you access to other resources you may not have in your own operation. For example, feed costs may be cheaper than at home since we buy in bulk. If you want to sell your bulls, you share the cost of hiring sales crews, auctioneers, veterinarians and facilities,” Evans says. “We also provide other services such as ultrasound scans and BVD (bovine viral diarrhea) testing, and an open and bred replacement heifer sale. The producers who use the test station say benefits outweigh their costs.”

Woody adds that producers with top-performing bulls actually find that test stations provide an economic advantage. Although he and Evans are not able to provide actual figures on economic gain, both say that station users have been pleased with the bottom line.

“If their bulls perform well, producers report an economic advantage from the bulls they sell here or privately later,” Woody says. The SIU program has sold 1,700 bulls during its 28 years of service. “If you have low performers your bulls may not sell well. The hard cost may indeed outweigh the economic benefits. But you still walk away with a gauge for where your performance program is.”

At OBI, the last two sales have resulted in average prices of \$1,800-\$2,000, with the Angus average another \$50 more. “Usually the top-selling bulls are Angus,” Evans says. “Overall, only about one-third of the bulls tested are sold through the station. Some bulls do not qualify, and some producers use the station for services only. We are often the ‘stamp of approval’ mentioned in private sale catalogs.”

Evans says test stations are a good launching pad for relatively new breeders



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PHOTO COURTESY OF DEE WOODY, SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY



► John Carlson, co-director of the Western Illinois University Bull Testing Program, says bulls are indexed so breeders get a rather substantial amount of information in a situation that provides an unbiased comparison.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN CARLSON, WESTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

who want to secure a solid reputation for having a performance herd. "You only get a sample of your herd's performance at a test station, but if the sample is successful you can increase traffic at home," he says. "When you add visibility to your breeding program, you can add value to the cattle you sell."

Most of the producers who place bulls at OBI are small- to moderate-size producers, Evans says, although a handful of large producers also participate to tap a bigger audience for marketing and to get cattle in front of people who may not usually see them. Since 1973, OBI has tested about 17,000 head. To be eligible for the sale, Angus bulls must index in the top 70% of their contemporary group or meet breed-specific independent culling levels for cumulative ADG and adjusted 365-day weight. Other breed-specific requirements must also be met.

"Bull testing is not for every producer. It has to match your breed and herd goals for genetic improvement, marketing, access to other services and convenience," Evans says. "But if you're interested, look at the opportunity, visit with test station personnel and decide whether or not performance testing will fit with your program."

Hobbs encourages other producers to try performance testing. "This is an especially good route for small producers to take because you can compare your bulls with other bulls around the country, even if you only have five or 10 bulls to test," he says. "If you are not tracking such data as birth and weaning weights, then you don't know where your program is at. Ultrasound is also becoming a valuable tool for determining carcass data. Commercial producers are dependent on this data, and it is our responsibility to provide as much as we can."

John Carlson, co-director, Western Illinois University (WIU) Bull Testing Program, Macomb, adds, "The days of having cattle just for fun are gone. Bulls are indexed so breeders get a rather substantial amount of information in a situation that provides an unbiased comparison. Today's cattle producer is extremely conscious of the bottom line, and bulls can make that line appear a lot brighter."

Making the Grade

Every test station or on-farm testing program has its own set of requirements for Angus bulls to "make the grade" for sale. Most are based on performance measurements, Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) and expected progeny difference (EPD) data available from the American Angus Association.

In the Missouri All-Breed Tested Bull Sale, for example, all bulls must be in the upper 60th percentile of EPDs for two of four traits — birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight and maternal milk — to qualify. At the Illinois Performance-Tested Bull Sale, order

is decided through the Five State Beef Initiative (FSBI) Performance Power Score, which is based on the percentile rank for the same four traits. A Carcass Power Score, or percentile rank for marbling/percent intramuscular fat and percent retail product, is also included in the 2003 sale order decision.

Southern Illinois University (SIU) Beef Evaluation Station coordinators provide potential bull buyers with similar sale bull data, including weaning weight and adjusted 365-day weight, average daily gain (ADG), feed per pound of gain (F:G), weight per day of age (WDA) and each bull's ratio for trait measurement. In addition, low birth weight EPDs are flagged, along with ultrasound carcass measurements for fat, loin-eye area and marbling/percent intramuscular fat.

Dave Seibert, University of Illinois Extension animal systems educator, East Peoria, encourages Angus producers to consider performance testing as a way to learn more about how bulls rank with and compare to others in the breed.

▶ Many performance testing stations will allow producers to sell the bulls on test, but there are generally qualifications that must be met to do so.

"You want to produce bulls with genetic merit that are going to benefit your herd and commercial herds," he says. "Seedstock producers need to be able to pay their bills with quality bulls, and commercial operators need to pay their bills with bulls that meet performance minimums. That is how we are going to better the beef industry."

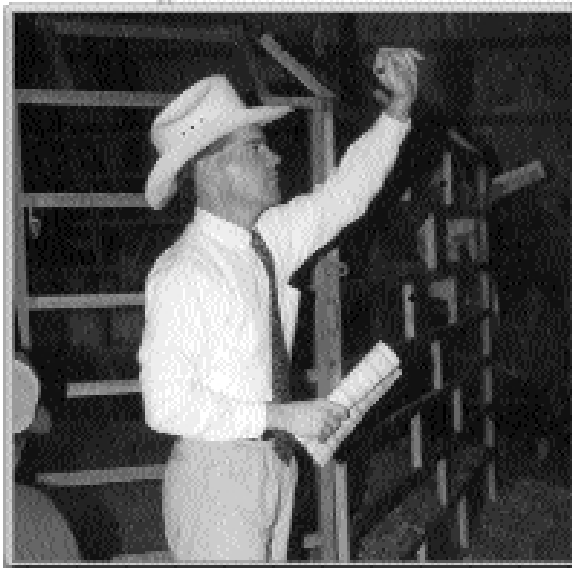


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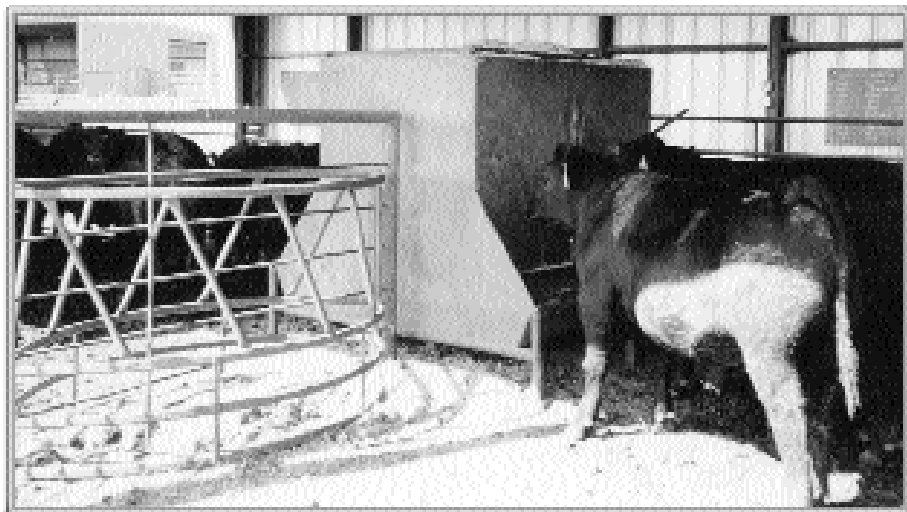


PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN EVANS, OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

▶ "Bull testing is not for every producer. It has to match your breed and herd goals for genetic improvement, marketing, access to other services and convenience," says John Evans, coordinator of Oklahoma Beef Inc., Stillwater. OBI is the second-largest bull testing station in the United States.