



Angus Stakes

► by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor

Prepare to deal with the challenges

As we gather for industry events and activities, it seems discussion always includes what the greatest challenges to the future success of the beef industry are and how independent cattlemen can maintain a role. In my next few columns I want to talk about a few of our greatest challenges. With each challenge comes opportunity, and we definitely have within our grasp the means, the structure and the talent to lay the groundwork for a flourishing purebred Angus industry that our great-grandchildren can inherit.

Not the threat

During the Cattle Industry Annual Convention & Trade Show in San Antonio, Texas, I sat in on the open session of the National Beef Cattle Evaluation Consortium (NBCEC) meeting Feb. 2. Articles in past issues have provided information on what the consortium is and its goals for the future, especially relating to multi-breed evaluation (see “Consortium Proposes Multi-Breed Analysis,” p. 102, August 2004 *Angus Journal*, and “A Step Closer to Reality,” p. 259, October 2004 *Angus Journal*).

Much of the session I was able to listen to dealt with education and outreach efforts, which are, by the way, considerable and funded by tax dollars.

Part of the educational update discussed a successful seminar series for graduate students to interest them in quantitative genetics. The group’s budget included \$50,000 for an Extension education program.

Another section discussed the status of a sire selection manual that is being written, reviewed and edited to serve as the industry standard reference for bull selection. The intent is to finish it by July in order to have some copies at the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) meeting in Billings, Mont., but to allow other entities to actually publish the manual in book form as their own. Chapters range from visual appraisal to DNA to crossbreeding.

Other discussions ranged from workshops to research efforts in regard to feed efficiency, cow adaptability and DNA validation.

There was also an update on the multi-breed analysis. Shorthorn, Tarentaise and American Red Brangus were reported to be coming into the group and in line to be included in the multi-breed analysis. As of that meeting, the NBCEC was building upon the pedigree file of the American Simmental Association, which includes Simmental and

Simmental derivatives, Maine-Anjou, and Chianina. To that, the NBCEC had added information from the germplasm evaluation program at the Roman L. Hruska U.S. Meat Animal Research Center (MARC), Clay Center, Neb. The first breed added to the mix was Red Angus. Its pedigree file had been successfully included, but the consortium had yet to do a parallel run in which the Red Angus National Cattle Evaluation (NCE) figures could be compared to those derived by the multi-breed analysis. Limousin’s pedigrees were being added, with Gelbvieh, then Charolais, next in line.

A follow-up interview with Cornell University’s John Pollak in early April revealed that Cornell had completed a subsequent evaluation and had sent it to the American Red Angus Association (ARAA) for review. An evaluation including Canadian Simmental, Red Angus (U.S. and Canadian), Limousin and Gelbvieh is currently in the works, and the Charolais pedigree file had been added to the pedigree database.

This is not a fly-by-night operation. It is being guided by intelligent people who have their hearts in the right place, who are intent on education, and who, with the multi-breed analysis, are filling a void in the industry. It was inevitable, but that does not mean its success is a given.

No givens

The NBCEC is funded annually by a special appropriation from Congress that is overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). With the original five-year allocation completed, funding for the NBCEC moves to an annual request process this year. That means funding is not guaranteed and could be affected by issues ranging from national security to domestic policy. Pollak, the leader of the consortium effort, has been open about this limitation

and that the consortium hopes to establish the multi-breed analysis structure and then farm it out to a for-profit “entity” to make it a self-sustaining program.

You can think of it much like how the American Angus Association worked on the research effort to develop ultrasound as a tool for measuring carcass traits, but the technology was put into industry via a separate, private firm.

Also, the breeds involved are becoming impatient to get figures that they can share with their members. In San Antonio it was pointed out that the consortium had been working to include the Red Angus data for a year and still did not have a direct comparison to evaluate. The consensus of the group was that to have to wait that long for each breed to be added was infeasible. Of course, it is to be expected that the first breed to be added would be the toughest and that, with the lessons learned, each subsequent breed addition should be easier. Then again, the consortium had yet to address issues like contemporary groups, whole-herd reporting and within-breed adjustments.

It was also pointed out that to go any faster would mean pulling people away from other projects, including individual breed work. Now think about this: The breeds involved gave the NBCEC the mandate to direct its efforts and monies toward finishing the prototype multi-breed analysis — which would provide multi-breed expected progeny differences (EPDs) for four traits (birth weight, weaning weight, milk and yearling weight) — and to have it ready for publication in summer 2006, with the understanding that it would take researchers away from individual breed work during that time.

That mandate was said to have originated in a meeting of six or seven breed associations prior to the NBCEC meeting in San Antonio. It was noted in the NBCEC meeting that the cost of office work is “killing” the smaller breed associations, and they are considering joining together to share this task. They want the multi-breed analysis sooner rather than later.

Obviously, the consortium is starting to be affected by the wills of the different breed associations. I shudder at the damage that can be done with the politics within one breed, let alone more than 15. While a challenge, it is not insurmountable.

None of the breeds have seen where they are going to rank yet in the analysis. If and when they have to look themselves in the mirror, will they stick to the plan? Economics may dictate that they do.

Where’s the challenge?

The consortium in and of itself is not the threat. The multi-breed analysis in and of

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itself is not the threat. Each has a lot to offer the industry. The threats are limited access, an uncertain infrastructure for privatization of the multi-breed analysis and confusion.

The number of individuals who have been privy to the educational workshops and meetings of the consortium has been few. While I can understand the "train the trainer" concept, I have a problem with only the elite being given access to the thought process behind what is funded with tax dollars and intended to establish the genetic analyses for the beef industry in the future.

In the past, associations (guided by their members) have always charged university personnel to do the analyses they've wanted done. This new system seems backward — with decisions made a long way from mainstream producer input.

The timing at which the American Angus Association was invited to participate is an indicator of how little say the Association might have in a program that is touted to be the replacement for individual breed evaluations. That's unacceptable.

And who will be *the entity*? To be fair, it could be multiple entities. What has been funded with tax dollars and done at land-grant universities is, by law, public domain and could be licensed to be used by numerous entities. Pollak is adamant that what is being developed at the consortium with government funding will be public domain and available to anyone to use. He provides an example with the heifer pregnancy EPD developed by the consortium. Different entities can utilize the heifer pregnancy research in one of three ways:

- 1) Send performance and pedigree files to the consortium/entity and pay the consortium/entity to run the evaluation;
- 2) Buy the license to the software and bring the software in-house to run the evaluation themselves; or
- 3) Ask how it is done, paying a consultation fee, and use that information to build a program for themselves.

The money generated by processing, licensing and consulting would fund other consortium research initiatives.

The multi-breed analysis is a slightly different beast than the software to run one EPD. Few — save maybe the largest of the breed associations, universities or corporate entities — would be able to hire people capable of option 3, and then there would be the consultant fee to consider. Option 2's feasibility depends on the price tags of the software and of the computer system capable of handling it, which again gives the advantage to large entities. To me, it also

totally diminishes the overall goal to have one analysis with comparable EPDs.

According to Pollak, this will be taken care of with the decision-support module being built by Dorian Garrick at Colorado State University. This Web module will allow a commercial producer to input herd characteristics and marketing goals to obtain a list of bulls (representing multiple breeds) that it determines, using the EPDs established through the multi-breed analysis, are best-suited to attain the producer's goals.

That brings us back to one entity doing the national multi-breed analysis. To date, most of the talk has been that "the entity" — singular — would take the multi-breed analysis into the commercial sector. In the right hands, this could be the best, most efficient model for the industry. But, in the wrong hands, it could be a big blow to the independent cattle producer. What if that entity were a major packer or an entity similar to the template of the former Future Beef? And, while that may not be the intent of those involved now, what will prevent it from happening 10, 15 or 20 years from now? What if the entity is the government? Do we really want to follow the model of the dairy industry? How much say would you have in these genetic evaluations?

For these very reasons, I agree with the American Angus Association Board's stance that it would be ill-advised for the Association to sign on and contribute our database to the effort at this point. You've spent a lot of time, effort and dollars building the database at the American Angus Association. It is, without doubt, the most well-documented, well-tested and pertinent information you and your customers have on which to make decisions. It would be wrong to put that into a program that could end up under the control of an entity that would restrict your access to the data.

Consequences

- Now, what does that mean to you?
- ▶ In trying to protect the database from those who use computer spiders to access the information you have paid to compile, the Association has instituted some protection measures that make data access more complicated for you as well. It's not what anyone on staff or on the Board would want to do. Unfortunately, it's a ramification of the world in which we live.
 - ▶ The NBCEC could be refused funding before the prototype is complete, leaving the associations and the future of multi-breed analysis in question. The group did set aside \$50,000 in its budget in case it fails to get funding for a year. Currently funded through July 2006, Pollak says he hopes to know the fate of the funding for 2006-2007 by August 2005.

- ▶ If the prototype comes to fruition, Angus bulls will be in the evaluation because other breeds give EPDs to purebred Angus cattle and crossbred Angus cattle. Does this give those bulls and their owners an advantage? If so, will it encourage producers to register Angus cattle with other registries? We have a public relations (PR) challenge in being able to explain why

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Angus bull XYZ has an NBCEC birth weight (BW) EPD of 2.4 and an Angus BW EPD of 3.6 (or vice versa).

- ▶ Will commercial cattlemen seek to use breeds that register crossbred cattle so they can get EPDs on their animals via the breed-up programs? What will that do to demand for Angus genetics? Angus information?
- ▶ Obviously, with only four multi-breed EPDs currently in the works, there will be some breed-specific EPDs in addition to the multi-breed EPDs, at least for the foreseeable future. This may cause some confusion and will take some education. The consortium is handling this challenge by educating Extension personnel so they can educate the masses.
- ▶ For the traits included in the multi-breed analysis, bull studs could potentially run two sets of EPDs — those of the consortium and those of the Association — or they could opt to run one set. Will they run Angus EPDs for Angus bulls and NBCEC EPDs for others? Just last weekend I reviewed a sale book of predominantly Angus cattle carrying Angus EPDs that also included two Simmental-Angus bulls. The crossbred bulls carried the same information, including EPDs in boxes to match those on the Angus bulls. There was no explanation of where those numbers came from or if they were on the same EPD scale as the Angus EPDs. If I were not in tune with the nuances of the situation, I would have compared the crossbreds'

figures directly to the figures of the Angus bulls.

- ▶ A bull stud could be the entity. What does this do to competition? Diversity of the gene pool?
- ▶ At the very minimum, we have a real PR challenge on our hands. We look like the bad guys for not contributing to this “industry effort that is all for the good of the cattle industry (tongue in cheek).” We’re the big, bad wolf — the one who wants everybody else out of business because they won’t play our game. Then again, we are the overwhelming majority, and if everybody who’s not Angus seems to have it out for us, it’s because they are fighting for survival and we, basically, have said we’re not interested in their survival. Are we sure?

Ironically, I believe the American Angus Association is the only hope for independent cattle producers to stay that way — independent. We have the programs and services in place right now for what I call a loose vertical coordination that still allows competition and choice at each purchasing juncture. You’ve built those programs and services: Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR); Beef Record Service (BRS); Angus Information Management Software (AIMS); AngusSourceSM; the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Supply Development team and its network of licensed feedlot and packer partners, along with loyal retail and restaurant customers serving *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand products; and our regional manager field force that has no equal in terms of service and dedication. The *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin* are

positioned to keep Angus members and their customers the most informed cattlemen in the industry, and the Angus Foundation provides the underpinnings for education, youth and research efforts in the future.

If our breed is united in its vision, I have no doubt we can withstand this test. But we can’t just put our heads in the sand and hope the multi-breed analysis will go away. If the consortium does not succeed, the idea will because it fulfills an industry need. The questions are: Who will control it? Who will promote it? And who will have access to the data? Expect the national media to love the novel idea. Expect Extension to appreciate the attention it is given. Expect commercial beef producers to welcome the concept of one set of EPDs directly comparable across breeds. Expect confusion among commercial producers when it doesn’t quite happen that way, and be ready with accurate explanations.

What would it take for me to say the Association should join in the consortium’s multi-breed analysis?

- 1) A guarantee that the information would always be in the public domain in a usable form and that it would never be used by corporate agriculture to gain an advantage over independent cattlemen.
- 2) The ability to not go backward in our genetic predictions in order to make them work within the multi-breed analysis.
- 3) Guarantees to protect the intellectual property of the American Angus Association.
- 4) Independence from government funding. (Ask for the funding, but don’t rely on it.)
- 5) A lead role in the decision-making proportionate to our data contribution. (This is the Association’s duty and responsibility to the membership.)
- 6) Part of the funding. (We do everything Iowa State University did for Angus genetic evaluation when ISU was granted funding as part of the consortium. For that matter, could we seek similar government funding? We compile more data and have a sustainable structure already in place.)

Whatever happens, there will be challenges and there will be opportunities. We need to think through the scenarios and discover what’s in the best interests of our members and the customers who keep us in business.

In the meantime, take heart. Advancements in our genetic evaluation are not being put on hold to make the multi-breed prototype a reality. And, the value of Angus cattle are not faltering because cattlemen know the premiums they garner with Angus cattle, and they rely upon the database you have built at the American Angus Association.



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