

# Continuous Growth

Beef Improvement Federation president encourages producer involvement.

by **Troy Smith**, field editor

The first time this scribe attended a Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Annual Meeting and Research Symposium was in 1997. The event was hosted in Dickinson, N.D., which surely is cow country, but there weren't many cowmen present. While there were some progressive, deep-thinking seedstock producers in the crowd, they definitely represented a minority. Members of academia composed a majority of the audience, as well as the roster of speakers. They were geneticists and other animal scientists involved in research conducted at land-grant institutions or by USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS).

Things have changed. At BIF conferences during the last several years, the mix of attendees has differed. The scientists still turn out in force, but they've been joined by growing numbers of cattle folk — a lot more seedstock breeders and commercial cow-calf producers, too.

Cattleman Craig Bieber has been a BIF-believer for more than a decade. He was elected to the organization's board of directors in 2012 and, at the 2015 BIF Symposium, the Leola, S.D., seedstock breeder was named BIF president.

Progressive producers have played influential roles since BIF was founded in 1967. Particularly during the early years, however, there was a perception that BIF was geared more toward the scientist types. Bieber ranks among the BIF leaders who have tried to dispel that notion.

"When you attend BIF meetings, you are exposed to a lot of highly intelligent people, and the work they do often is



PHOTO BY TROY SMITH

► Steve Munger (left), retiring Beef Improvement Federation president, was presented the president's gavel by incoming BIF President Craig Bieber during an awards luncheon in Biloxi, Miss., June 11 at the organization's 47th annual convention.

highly technical. Some of it can be hard to understand at the beginning. With more exposure, you get a better grasp of it," offers Bieber, saying cattlemen need not be intimidated.

"We've worked hard on getting researchers to translate the science into more common cowboy parlance, but we're also encouraging the cowboys to step up their game and move out of their comfort zone," he says. "Their thinking will be challenged but they end up with a better understanding of cattle selection technology."

## Stepping out of comfort zone

Craig Bieber grew up on the ranch his parents, Ron and Lois Bieber, founded in the early 1960s. Originally

► Bieber Red Angus fully engaged in the seedstock business in 1975. With his parents transitioning to mostly advisory roles, Craig Bieber and his wife, Peggy, now oversee the production and marketing of some 600 bulls per year.

a commercial cow-calf operation, the Bieber outfit's focus began to change in 1968 with the purchase of its first registered Red Angus females. In 1975, the commercial cows were sold and Bieber Red Angus Ranch was fully engaged in the seedstock business. With his parents transitioning to mostly advisory roles, Craig Bieber and his wife, Peggy, now oversee the production and marketing of some 600 bulls per year.

In addition to his father, Bieber proudly claims the late Roy Wallace as a mentor. A cattleman and long-time employee of Select Sires, the cigar-chomping Wallace's BIF involvement began during the organization's very early years. Becoming an influential and perennial fixture at BIF, Wallace was credited with attending all of the first 40 annual meetings. In memory of Wallace, the organization awards two college scholarships annually. It is fitting, for Roy Wallace was a BIF evangelist who strived to bring young people, and particularly young producers, into the fold.

"Roy told me that I should be going to BIF meetings, and he just kept after me," says Bieber. "I was kind of reluctant at first. The timing of meetings was not always convenient."



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BIF's annual meeting is usually in May or June, which is a busy time of year for many cattle producers. It surely is on Bieber's ranch. In addition, BIF conferences are hosted at various locations across the country. In many instances, the host cities are a long way from Leola. Attendance means logging some serious mileage.

"At Roy's urging, I went once and then again. I made up my mind to go as often as I could. I guess what attracted me most was the opportunity to meet so many different people — all interested in furthering genetic improvement," explains Bieber.

From the beginning BIF was meant to bring researchers, Extension personnel and beef producers together in that common cause. Early efforts were aimed at establishing standards for the performance programs of various state beef improvement organizations and breed associations. Over the years, BIF has provided a forum for debating the practical worth of tools and technologies applied to genetic selection. Thus, says Bieber, BIF has impacted all cattlemen.

"Forty years ago, it was about performance measures like 205-day weights. Later it was EPD (expected progeny difference) values,

then selection indexes and then genomics. BIF became the place to go if you want to learn about cutting-edge technology for enhancing genetic prediction," Bieber explains.

Exposure gained through his own involvement prompted Bieber to "dip his toe" into the use of ultrasound technology for measurement of carcass traits. Now ultrasound is applied to every yearling animal that Bieber places on gain test.

"Without a doubt, what I learned through my BIF experience made us early adopters of DNA technology. It's not perfect. There are no silver bullets, but every technology, after it's tested, debated, honed and made better, puts another tool in our toolbox," adds Bieber.

During his term as president and beyond, Bieber plans to continue promoting producer participation in BIF. He says that's really been a long-term BIF goal. Unlike the early days, when BIF conferences attracted maybe 150 people, the meetings now draw increasingly eclectic crowds of 600 to 700.

"We are seeing more involvement by both seedstock breeders and commercial producers. Their real-world input helps

researchers figure out what's useful — what technologies can be applied in a practical way and make economic sense," says Bieber.

"Some of BIF content gets so technical that producers feel overwhelmed the first time," said Bieber. "I don't think they should be intimidated by the level of discussion. Pick up the little bits that you can and continue to go, because I think one will learn more as you go through the years," he adds.

"I think a producer has to be willing to be a little bit uncomfortable and willing to push the limits of their thinking. Part of BIF's purpose is to challenge conventional thought. If you're willing to stretch, it will help you grow."



**Editor's Note:** *Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb. The 2015 BIF Annual Convention was hosted by Mississippi State University and the Mississippi Extension Service June 9-12 at the Beau Rivage Casino and Hotel in Biloxi. The Angus Journal and LiveAuctions.tv provide comprehensive online coverage of the event at [www.BIFconference.com](http://www.BIFconference.com). Visit the Newsroom for summaries, proceedings, PowerPoints and audio of the sessions; the Awards page for announcements of award winners; and the Photos page for photo galleries of the tour.*