



California's
Ray-Mar Angus Ranch
has focused on a balance of
traits in developing their
seedstock program.

by *Kindra Gordon*



Ten years ago, Ray-Mar Angus Ranch in Oakdale, Calif., was just embarking into the seedstock business. Family patriarch Ray Alger has more than 50 years of diverse experience in agriculture — from beef to dairy to feedlot operations.

Of his entry into raising registered Angus, he says, “We have been raising commercial cattle from several breeds for a long time. We’ve always found Angus to be the most efficient users of native California winter hill grazing. Our goal was to produce our own bulls, so we began by buying some elite purebred cows and have grown from there.”

Today, Ray-Mar numbers about 1,100 cow-calf pairs on its California ranch. Another ranch operated in Lodgepole, Neb., SandPoint Cattle Co., has upward of 1,000 cow-calf pairs.

The name Ray-Mar is a merger of Ray and Mary, his wife’s name. Their son, Brent, and his wife, RaeAnn, along with Russ and Cindy Fisher, oversee and manage the purebred operation in California, while John

and Laurie Widdowson manage SandPoint in Nebraska.

The Algers’ other son, Jeff, and son-in-law, Trey Ozenbaugh, work with the commercial calf and custom heifer-raising operation — A&A Cattle Co. Ray’s diverse operation includes about 12,000 acres of leased and owned land in central California, as well as about 10,000 acres owned in Nebraska. His newest venture is 3,000-plus farm acres in Texas, which will be used primarily for a dairy and possibly another Angus operation.

A balanced focus

In its quest to develop a top-notch seedstock herd, Ray-Mar has acquired Angus genetics from more than 200 herds in the U.S. In this process, the Algers have acquired the dam or full sister of 30-plus of the top proven sires in the breed. Their program includes extensive use of embryo transfer (ET) — averaging about 500 embryos in recipient females each year. The embryos are from their own donor cows, as well as from other top progressive Angus herds in the U.S.

A family man

In his 60-plus years, Ray Alger has amassed a variety of experiences in agriculture. Influenced by his grandfather and father, Alger remembers always having a connection with livestock and farming. When he was just a teenager, he began buying and selling an assortment of beef cattle. He also started a calf nursery that has evolved into a successful business, continuing to this day.

During the last 40 years, his involvement in agriculture has grown into several enterprises. Along with his wife, Mary, the couple established Ray-Mar Farms, which has included various entities over the years: farming, raising dairy cattle and commercial beef cattle, developing Holstein replacement females, and feeding approximately 125,000 cattle annually in their own feedlot in California and in partnership with yards in Arizona, Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska.

The couple is also proud to have raised two sons and two daughters, and they now enjoy 12 grandchildren.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAY-MAR ANGUS RANCH

In building their herd, the Algers have adhered to strict culling and emphasizing a balance of traits when selecting seedstock animals. Ray outlines the traits that are important to him by describing a wagon wheel with eight spokes, each spoke a specific trait: 1) fertility, 2) maternal qualities, 3) growth, 4) carcass, 5) disposition, 6) soundness, 7) repeatability (the ability to produce progeny as good or better as the cow herself), and 8) longevity.

“Those are my goals and the genetics I’d like to see in our cattle,” he says. “We are committed to balanced cattle, and I’m looking for an animal that ranks an 8 to 10 in all of those categories. A cow that has a few 10s in some of those areas and 2s to 4s in other areas represents a wheel with some weak spokes, and that wheel will eventually break.”

He says a wagon wheel with weak spokes would have never gotten the pioneers across the country; similarly, a cow with weak traits will not do well in the long run for a seedstock producer.

Ray credits some of his cattle-selection philosophy to his past experiences in raising dairy cattle.

“Through the dairy industry, I’ve gained the experience in how to mate cattle,” he says. “I’ve learned how to mate a cow that is weak in any one of those areas and try to correct her weakness.”

In developing the Angus herd, Ray has also tried to steer clear of trends. “I may follow some trends 10% of the time, but looking back on the Angus industry, it is evident that following trends too closely has gotten some herds into trouble,” he says.

Other important criteria

The Algers say herd health is an important part of a successful cattle operation. To that end, they are focusing on herd health by testing and requiring the entire herd — including recipients — to be free of bovine viral diarrhea (BVD), bovine leukosis virus (BLV) and Johne’s disease. Brent says this is an effort to “stay one step ahead” of public and industry issues.

“No matter how expensive the animal was, if they are compromising herd health, they should not be in the herd,” Ray adds.

The Algers have also been testing genetic markers for tenderness among herd sires and dams, as well as monitoring feed efficiency

among their herd. These are two areas they believe will become increasingly important in the industry.

As their Angus operation grew during the last decade, Ray-Mar Angus Ranch initially sold bulls private treaty. In September 2004 they held their first bull sale. A spring sale is now also conducted at the ranch in Nebraska. Presently, they offer about 200-250 registered Angus bulls in California and 100-150 in Nebraska. Their eventual goal is to grow to selling 300-plus bulls at each location.

Of their sale offerings, Brent says, “Our goal is to develop better Angus genetics for commercial cattlemen, as well as the purebred industry.”

As part of that commitment to the commercial industry, all bulls are semen-tested to the highest industry standards and are sold guaranteed. Ray-Mar range-tests all bulls before they are put in the sale. Brent explains that they are managed in the hill country to make sure that sound feet, conformation and hardiness are all part of the total package.

They admit switching to range-testing bulls was a tough decision to make, sacrificing weight gain potential in the feedlot.

“We have eliminated a couple bloodlines in the first year alone by range-testing our bulls,” Brent reports. “After hearing our customers’ feedback on the ability of these bulls to cover rough country and get their job done while not falling apart, I am convinced that range-testing may be one of our program’s biggest assets, if not the biggest.”

As they move into their second decade of raising Angus, Ray says they’ll continue to emphasize a balanced approach.

“The fun part of raising registered Angus has been putting together a certain type of cattle, and as new calves are born each year, you see the results of your efforts,” he concludes. “They depict the goals you had for the enhancement of the Angus breed.”

