

Why Not the Best?

California commercial Angus herds make use of AI.

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In the lush Sacramento Valley, uniform black cows and their calves graze irrigated pastures; 550 miles north, amazingly similar cattle make their living in desert country, sagebrush the only splash of color on the horizon.

Owning and operating both herds despite the stark differences in climate is no problem now for Herb Holzapfel, who lives on the Willows, Calif., Holzapfel Ranch. He manages Cedar Springs Ranch near Arlington, Ore., with help from an assistant on location “and a good calendar book.”

Those aren't the only irons Holzapfel has in his fire. When he isn't flying himself to Oregon in his Cessna 185 Skywagon or riding a jet to Washington, D.C., to serve on the National Trade Committee Board for Farm Credit Services, he might be harvesting rice. Or he might be chairing a board meeting at the local Farmer's Rice Co-op.

Then again, he might be synchronizing estrus to breed all of his 1,200 commercial-Angus females by artificial insemination (AI).

A slacker, he is not.

It must be something in the family blood.

“My mother brought some of the first Angus cows

into California in 1938 from Canada. She liked Angus cattle and wanted to raise black cows,” he says. Those were the last cows the Holzapfels ever bought.

“We just kept keeping heifers until we got to what we are today,” the son says.

Concentrating on fertility

He started Aling heifers in the 1970s and a decade later expanded that to the whole herd, after he missed the winning bid at a bull sale.

“I liked a Scotchcap son really well, and I couldn't afford to buy him,” Holzapfel recalls. “I got upset and said, ‘You know what, I'll just breed all my cows to that bull's sire’ — so that's what I did.” Thus began a continuous AI program that has spanned more than 30 years.

Many thought he was crazy, even his own father, he says. Yet Holzapfel saw a way to improve his Angus herd and gain a more uniform calf crop.

“You can't get genetic improvement if you don't use AI and consistency,” he says. “When I pick a bull, I use that bull for two years on my cow herd, and I get consistency. It's huge what that does.”

Holzapfel uses similar genetics on both herds for uniform calf crops, aside from the month-later calving period up north.



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"I use a low-birth-weight bull on my heifers," he says, "but in my cow herd, I want more growth and size. In my bulls, I want more birth weight than what the industry is doing. You get much bigger calves at weaning."

Selecting bulls with birth weight (BW) expected progeny differences (EPDs) in the 3.0 to 4.0 range makes for more pounds of beef, he says, noting some cows did well with calves from a bull with a 4.9 BW.

If it weren't for his AI program, Holzapfel says, "I'd be forced to go out of the cattle business." He doesn't understand why everybody doesn't use the technology.

"Even my grandsons, until they got older, they didn't know that everybody didn't just AI," he says. "They grew up completely with it, and they're both great technicians now."

Giving credence to that moxie in the blood, the oldest, still a full-time college student, helps Genex Cooperative AI breed some of the largest herds in Oregon and Nevada. The younger one Aled his own herd last year with a 90% success rate in two heats.

"He was in high school and detected and bred all those cows," a proud grandpa says. "Didn't even have a cleanup bull."

Fertility is among the most important traits in the Holzapfel Ranch cows, bound by harsh culling criteria, yet the herd includes 17- and 18-year-olds that have only ever conceived artificially. In fact, despite using some cleanup bulls, the only cows kept are those from AI sires.

"If you select for that, your fertility just keeps getting better and better," Holzapfel says. Genex-published reports say the steers perform well, too, "known to produce 60% to 70% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) carcasses."

When cows don't breed back through AI, they are sent down the road, but not until he turns something worthless to his operation into something of value to others. An estimated 10% to 15% of females are open. These he synchronizes to receive Hereford embryos and then sells.

"I never put black embryos in them. I think if there was a great calf, I'd probably want to steal it," he laughs. "It keeps me honest."

In the mature cows, Holzapfel says it's not unusual to get in the 80% success range on AI, all of which has built up a reputation to sell breeding stock with orders a year in advance. That helps with income planning, as well.

Know your needs

Also known for growing cattle to match ranch environments, he uses free-choice hay and protein-based alfalfa pellets milled to include all suggested minerals.



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"The most important thing by raising them that way, you don't screw up their rumen," he explains. "It's adjusted to forage instead of grain."

Holzapfel perfected the nutritional program based on needs at Cedar Springs Ranch.

"It's on the Oregon Trail," he says. "It was where they watered passing through the desert country." That namesake still waters the large herd, but provides few blades of green grass.

Years ago a nutritionist passed along this old trick: Out in the sagebrush hills and juniper trees, feeding a quarter pound of alfalfa hay every other day after lunch will keep cows fat through the summer months.

"The reason we do it after lunch? If you disrupt their normal grazing pattern, they'll lose weight running in to the hay truck," Holzapfel explains. "So you want them in at water."

There's logic and economic sense to everything the multifaceted rancher puts his mind to, far beyond the cattle business.

He took matters into his own hands after he and his wife had been saving to build a house for years.

"We lived in a single-wide trailer for the first 10 years of marriage with two children. I got a bid to build and it was about \$80 per square foot," Holzapfel recalls. "I told Ginger we could never build a house for that. She cried, and I said, 'Screw it. I'll build it myself.'" So he did, for \$24 per square foot.

Before taking over the ranch, his parents leased out fields to rice farmers. Driving along one day in a beat-up pickup with his cowdog

in the back, Holzapfel says he noticed the rice farmers were driving brand new pickups.

"So I thought, 'That's easy. I'll do that,'" he admits.

The timing on rice production fits his enterprise mix perfectly. Spring cow work is done by the time he plants the rice. In the fall, calving is done by the time the rice is ready to harvest.

"I utilize my labor and everything that way," he says. Still, "it was difficult" to get started.

Challenges make things more fun, right? By the time Holzapfel visited five banks to get a loan for rice farming equipment, he decided things had to change.

"I am now a bank board director. I was so mad that they didn't have better programs for young, beginning and small farmers," he says, "and now they do."

When unable to get the type of hay he wanted, what do you think Holzapfel did?

"I got a partner that I financed, and he runs the custom-haying equipment for me."

From 10 cows in 1938 to two ranches full of black Angus cattle in 2016, Holzapfel's mother lit the way for her son as he is now setting the precedent for his grandchildren — work hard, make a difference and embrace challenges.

"It's not that difficult," he says, "but the harder it is, the more fun it is."



Editor's Note: Hannah Johlman is an industry information intern and Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist with *Certified Angus Beef* LLC.