



Reaching for the Stars

Missourian uses DNA-powered guidance system.

by Lyndee Stabel, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Before modern technology, people used the stars to guide their travels because stars are constant and sure. They just needed to be able to read and follow those stars properly to reach any destination.

Steve Naegler, Willard, Mo., is concerned that many cattle ranchers trying to move their herds ahead today have lost track of those stars. They may be missing the true purpose of the whole beef industry — high-quality food — by focusing too narrowly on heterosis or growth technology without considering the effects on beef quality.

“That’s the roadmap to nowhere,” he says. “If you can’t turn out a good product, you’re not going to stay in business” in these times of escalating beef prices. Consumers cannot be expected to pay good money for low quality.

“The beef producer needs to produce better beef and provide them a good eating experience,” he emphasizes.

Not relying on luck

With the Prime grade representing only 3% of U.S. beef, anyone might think cattle that produce it are the result of luck or a happy coincidence. Naegler is among those not content to rely on luck. He has seen fellow Missourians blow far beyond that average through focused breeding programs.

The University of Missouri (MU) Thompson Farm herd at Spickard, Mo., consistently produces 30% Prime. Osborn Farms, Savannah, Mo., won the AngusSource® Carcass Challenge three years ago with a pen of 42 heifers reaching 55% Prime. The list goes on in Missouri and other states.

Meanwhile, CattleFax reports the Prime premium over ungraded beef reached \$60 per hundredweight (cwt.) last year, doubling the premium it commanded four years earlier.

These numbers tell Naegler one thing for sure: Most producers need to start placing a lot more emphasis on the quality of cattle they are raising.

Quality focus

In his operation of 110 commercial Angus cows, Naegler has always focused on quality. However, it was not until last fall, when he attended a meeting about a new program offered through MU, that he saw a clear way to capitalize on it. “Quality Beef by the Numbers” is designed to allow cow-calf producers to realize the value of their genetics by helping them retain ownership through the feedyard and market their animals for premiums on the grid.

Naegler loved the idea, but was a little hesitant because he had never fed his cattle before. He needed some kind of star to guide him toward confidence that his calves could perform well in the feedyard and packinghouse.

Then he heard about the new DNA tool, GeneMax™, offered through Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) and Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI). GeneMax helps producers identify their best animals by testing for individual gain and grade potential.

“As soon as I had a concept of what it was, I knew it was what I wanted. It’s the guidance I was looking for,” Naegler says. He began testing immediately, starting with the group of replacement heifers he had selected. Now he is moving on to his cow herd.

Mapping the way

Like using a telescope on those stars, the DNA information for each animal is helping Naegler to narrow his sights. Instead of just aiming for high quality, he is now using the data to set specific goals and standards for his cattle for the next three years.

The GeneMax scores rank individual animals between 1 and 100 at the top end for marbling and gain potential. Naegler saw that this tool would make it easier to select the top animals, but even he was a little surprised at how helpful the numbers could be. Out of the replacement heifers he planned to keep, some tested really well. Some did not.

“I had some down in the 20s, and what really got me was that I handpicked those out of the herd,” he says. “The thing is, you really can’t look at cattle and tell which ones are good or bad.”

This year Naegler set a minimum cutoff score of 70 for his replacement heifers. Any below that point will be culled. Next year he

hopes to move the cutoff to 80 and then on up to 90, so as to quickly develop replacement groups of 35 heifers all scoring above 90.

Those will be artificially inseminated (AIed) to balanced, but high-marbling and high-carcass-weight Angus bulls. From there Naegler plans to develop a young herd by replacing approximately 20% of the animals each year.

Some producers may find a cow they like and keep her for years, but Naegler says that is the wrong way to look at it.

“The big thing is you’re improving your genetics when you replace them,” he says. “But if you keep the same old cow for 15 years you haven’t moved the paint any.” When the time does come to sell, he adds, a 4- to 5-year-old cow is worth a lot more than a “short and solid” any day of the week.

It will take a little time to get his production quality up to the level he wants, but it is an exciting prospect, Naegler says. He’s looking forward to having some “real fun” in about three years when he’ll start feeding his cattle. At that point he also hopes to market some of the extra heifers through Missouri’s Show-Me-Select Replacement Heifer Program.

Naegler says GeneMax is a great tool for anyone who strives to be a good business manager and deliver a quality product.



► The DNA information Steve Naegler receives through GeneMax™ for each animal is helping him to narrow his sights. Instead of just aiming for high quality, he is now using the data to set specific goals and standards for his cattle for the next three years.

“If you really want to try to be efficient, make some money and do things you can be proud of, you almost have to do this,” he says. “Can you afford not to?”

He credits the Angus Association for continually making these advancements for commercial producers “on the front line and pushing the bar higher.” No matter what new tools come along or how the industry

changes, Naegler says producers need to make sure they have a reliable guide to stay on course toward consumers.

“The bottom line is that we’re doing the right thing for the beef industry,” he says.



Editor’s Note: Lyndee Stabel is a freelance writer for Certified Angus Beef LLC.