



# Crucible for Quality

Angus cattle, plan-based optimism help Oklahomans look past drought to ultimate goals.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

**Y**ou gotta love it when a plan comes together. In this decade, Jimmy and Tracy Taylor's data-driven herd south of Cheyenne, Okla., expanded to its practical capacity of 600 Angus cows on 12,000 acres, most of it owned.

Progeny from the carefully selected genetics managed in rotation through 38



► Lack of water for cattle meant a few traps and pastures got longer rests as they awaited a return to normal weather.

pastures turned in high marks last winter and spring: 315 steers and heifers made 58.4% *Certified Angus Beef*® brand (CAB®) and CAB Prime. Granted, there were nearly 10% Selects and a like share of Yield Grade (YG) 4s, but their plan is already dealing with that.

You gotta hate it when months go by offering little more than scattered showers while the sun bakes the withered roots of wheatgrass with a variety name made ironic by drought. Hot Jose maybe; dry Jose, sure — but this year definitely not Tall Jose.

The variety struggled to provide a fraction of normal forage in the usually lush creek-bottom traps, while elsewhere the little bluestem and buffalo grass fared little better. The native grass mix covers most of the 600-acre pastures that rise from the bordering Black Kettle National Grassland toward a plateau west of Elk City, where the Taylors live.

Heavily supplemented through the summer, after strategic culling, the top 95% of their spring cows weaned creep-fed calves a month earlier than last year as the smaller fall herd began making the best of a bad situation. Eventually, an equal number of



**Commitment to Excellence:  
2011 Commercial Award**

spring and fall calvers will help spread market risk, bull investment and labor.

### **They love it**

Despite, or maybe because of all the challenges, the Taylors love it. Having to feed cows on summer grass each day? Great opportunity to check on water, health needs and head counts while calves get used to a grain ration.

"If we feed perpendicular to the wind, we can spray for flies when we need to," Jimmy notes.

Pastures may seem cut up by old gas-well access roads, but that's a great infrastructure for ranch access. Drought of the century? Brings individual cow evaluation to the forefront as the profit makers get even better.

Silver linings abound, even without a cloud in the sky.

Recipients of the 2011 Commercial

Commitment to Excellence Award at the CAB Annual Conference in Sunriver, Ore., Sept. 22-24, the Taylors' partnership works well to make the best of just about anything. Tracy puts her husband in the starring role, but Jimmy says he couldn't do it without her support — especially those customized records that relate five years of feeding and carcass data to individual cows on the clipboard pages.

Dale Moore, the owner of Cattleman's Choice Feedyard near Gage, Okla., had nominated his customers for the past three years.

"I know they have that kind of commitment," he says. "They base their program on the CAB and Prime goal, and have made some of the most dramatic and positive changes among all of our customers."

## Grass roots

The ranch was put together starting in 1914 by Jimmy's great-grandfather, who bought and sold properties from that time into the Dust Bowl days. His father, Jim, was the first to actually manage the place, beginning in 1953.

"He used to say you could play marbles anywhere on this place, it was so overgrazed," Jimmy recalls. So Jim set out to restore it, noting the Black Kettle example where government range scientists reestablished prairie grasses on the drifts of abandoned



►Winners of the 2011 Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award, Jimmy and Tracy Taylor started with a goal to sell the most pounds of beef at weaning, but have since changed their goal to producing the best steak they can possibly make.

wheat fields. Cross-fencing turned into 22 bigger pastures and the network of 16 traps with improved grasses. The ranch pioneered intensive rotational grazing with long resting periods for the land.

Hereford cattle were the mainstay, later crossed with Simmentals, even a registered herd when Jimmy formed a father-son

partnership in 1980. Newlyweds then, the young Taylors learned every rock, ridge and creek before buying sole interest and taking over management in 1993.

"Our goal at that time was simply to sell the most pounds of beef at weaning," Jimmy says. "Over time, we began to see there is more security for our ranch and for the whole industry if we reoriented to give the consumer a better eating experience. We changed with the incorporation of registered Angus bulls to a goal of producing the best steak we can possibly make."

## The Angus age

That was a relatively recent decision, and those first Angus-cross calves arrived in 2006.

Introspection and external "research" helped the Taylors plan every aspect of high-quality beef production. As low-stress handling, a rising plane of nutrition through weaning, selection indexes and artificial insemination (AI) became the rule, the [www.CABpartners.com](http://www.CABpartners.com) website became a favorite.

That's where they found the list of licensed feedlots and checked out a few as they moved ahead with a plan to retain ownership.

"When I interviewed Dale (Moore), I found out real quick that our goals were very similar," Jimmy says. "We've been with him ever since."

Data and customer service are part of the reason.

Individual animal records open doors not



►The lack of rainfall this summer spurred the Taylors to locate grass in Nebraska for fall grazing.

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even imagined during the years of holistic but whole-herd management for pounds per cow and per acre, the Taylors say.

Deciding to go all-in with the Angus breed, they've used the AngusSource® program for genetic and source verification since 2007. Although their Angus adventure was just beginning, they found early encouragement in winning the regional AngusSource Carcass Challenge with those calves the next year.

Their replacement heifers retain those distinctive tags to help set them apart from some purchased heifers over the past few years, although the outside purchases have all but ended now. That's because of the individual data brought to bear on each replacement female.

Data from Cattleman's Choice and CAB, combined with Jimmy's observations and, since 2008, ultrasound scans for intramuscular fat (%IMF) are all organized in Tracy's spreadsheet.

### Data to information

"I've looked into some commercial cow-calf record programs," Jimmy says, "but it's a powerful weakness knowing what she can do already. I haven't found anything better."

It would be hard to imagine.

Tracy's report on the 18 herd bulls describes them all, from Summitcrest in Nebraska, Schaff Angus Valley in North Dakota and the Oklahoma J-Buckle and Express Ranches. It starts with year purchased, then tag number, registered name, maternal and carcass EPDs (expected



► With unshakable faith, the Taylors will sow a few patches of wheat for grazing again this winter, including this patch that faltered last spring.

progeny differences), ultrasound data and \$Values. The summary shows Angus breed average and Taylor bull-battery average, which is near or better in all columns, and far better in carcass EPDs.

The cow report/field-data sheet lists cows in ranch-tag order with source, calf tag, Bang's number, sire, progeny carcass history, %IMF since 2008, due date, calved date, location, calf tag, sex, sire, pasture bull and turn-in date, plus a few comments columns every couple of inches across. Color-coded and shaded

rows make note of any dead or sold.

"Over the years we sit down together and keep adapting the program, tweak it until it gives us exactly what he wants to see," Tracy says.

### Individuals are key

Not just for AI, but also pasture breeding, relatively small pastures on the big ranch allow Jimmy to match certain cows with the bulls that best complete their genetics.

Records are uppermost in mind when it's time to pick bulls, plan custom matings — and especially when choosing replacements.

"We look at them one at a time," Jimmy says. "We're just now getting to the point where data factors in enough to eliminate those weaker in carcass value." They can sort by sire groups, too, and consider sire effect on progeny from each cow.

"Jimmy calls off a number, and I read out to him what she has done," Tracy says. "It's kind of tedious, but he's building up a good herd this way. Good genetics that we know we want to keep. That's why he's supplementing instead of selling."

Having more data brings up another opportunity: synchronized AI for heifers. Until now, the AIed portion, perhaps one-third of the heifers, self-selected based on early cycling. That helps maintain high fertility, but the Taylors may start synchronizing the top half from records as well.

Once they calve, the emphasis is on



► Records are uppermost in mind when it's time to pick bulls, plan custom matings — and especially when choosing replacements. Tracy maintains an Excel file that she and Jimmy crafted to evaluate bulls and females.

setting them up for success. Monitoring body condition takes in more than a glance at fat cover on the ribs. Jimmy checks their fill, manure consistency, behavior and mineral consumption.

“When they start to hit the mineral harder, that’s another sign to move,” Jimmy says. “We really watch two or three things on the first- and second-calf heifers, because if we start to lose condition on them, we never get it back.”

## Low-stress plans

Creep-feeding was an innovation last year, a necessity in 2011, but that evolved in July, too. “We noticed the calves were first in line when we fed the cows, so we just added a little more there and quit using the feeders,” he says. “I really think that will help them get past weaning.”

Like AI, weaning takes place at ranch headquarters. The herds come into corrals adjacent to the trap rotation for what seems like just another supplement session, but the calves get shots to booster the May round of vaccines and cows go back out to the rotation.

“We watch the calves for four or five days and then they are turned out on the traps, too,” Jimmy says. “It has worked well for us.”

The Taylors lived at the remote

headquarters until 1998, Tracy says. “I liked it out there, but we moved to Elk City because we had three kids going to school there and we had two or three cars making the 40-mile round trip every day.”

More recently they began building a new country homestead northwest of town, starting with an all-purpose building that will eventually be for guests when their dream home takes shape. That building contains the ranch office where a well-used but fairly new HP computer sits on an antique roll-top desk that belonged to legendary Ranger and U.S. Marshal Jack Abernathy a century or more ago.

Tracy designed this building as well as the house to come, on a small acreage that has room for a hayfield and the dogs they love, including Hubcap, a stray that made friends with Jimmy out at the ranch.

## Unique details

“We decided to build close to town so we can always live there and not feel pressure to move to town when we get old,” Tracy says. “We plan ahead — we are detail people.”

The “kids” are now out on their own and living around Oklahoma City. Joel, 31, is in real estate but applies his degree in meteorology as a “Storm Chaser” on the

Discovery Channel; Jillian, 28, is a dental hygienist; Jason, 26, is married to Emily and sets up new accounts for national payroll contractor Paycom.

Hired ranch labor is hard to find because the oilfield industry pays so well. Part-time help fills in for big jobs, like working calves, weaning and AI, sometimes for cutting or spraying brush. Otherwise, the Taylors run a “ma and pa” ranch.

To be clear, Tracy enjoys the out country as much as Jimmy, but she does it her way. She has her own pickup.

“It’s not a feeding truck,” she insists. “I know what happened when I learned the lawn mowing.”

Maintaining fences is more to her liking, as it can take her to even more remote spots.

“I don’t ride a horse, but I’ll hop on a four-wheeler and go anywhere,” she says. Outfitted with steel-post racks, wire and tool boxes, she can cover nearly every stretch, except for a few reedy draws that require walking, regardless of footwear.

“I don’t dress like a cowboy,” Tracy says without apologies. Capri shorts and “steel-toed flip-flops” are the norm; “Jimmy doesn’t care as long as I don’t gripe if I get stomped on.”

Of course, she’s extra careful about that



► Three showers totaling a little more than an inch of rain allowed the Bermuda traps to green up just in time for weaning in August.