



Doing What Works

That meant a change from commodity crops to premium beef for this Oklahoma father and son.

Story & photos by Katy Kemp, Certified Angus Beef LLC

On the southern plains near Corn, Okla., you'll see the town's namesake everywhere. Row crops and winter wheat extend as far as the eye can see. That is, until you reach the father-son duo of Jim and Jay Richert's place, where black cows stand out among the fields.

"Not many people are doing what we're

doing in this area," Jim says. "Look around. This is corn ground. Ten years ago we were farming this, but we turned it into grass for more cattle."

Cattle have always been his favorite, since helping his dad build a cow-calf enterprise back in the late 1960s. When a field didn't have the best soil for cash crops, Richert's

father turned it back to native grasses and added cows. That experience convinced Jim that cattle on native grasses could compete with crops here, even if his neighbors didn't think so.

Straight-Hereford cows gave way to Brangus-sired baldies in the early 1980s, forming part of the herd base Jim took over 10 years later. To make cattle pencil out to pay more than crops, he turned toward more Angus genetics, selecting for quality and premium markets.

Selling stockers to feedlots wasn't paying a quality bonus, even though the Richerts were buying top-end Angus calves from a Wyoming ranch to go with their own. When that ranch decided to sell out, Jim saw an opportunity to sell his crossbreds and replace them with a foundation set of quality Angus heifers.

As grid-based pricing started to take off in the late 1990s, the Richerts saw more incentives taking shape.

Grid proof

"When grids developed, then we really started concentrating on selecting sires for carcass traits," Jim says. "[It's] probably one of



► Jim and Jay Richert, Corn, Okla., plan to keep improving until all replacements achieve GMX scores of at least 90, ideally 95. They know using the test in concert with focused sire selection and culling on carcass data will help them reach goals faster.

the best things we ever did. It's amazing. By doing that, our premiums just keep getting better."

The decision to retain ownership came from disappointment in other market channels. Trying to do everything in line with quality goals but unable to find a buyer to pay what they thought the cattle were worth, the men decided to "prove the quality" by feeding and selling cattle on grids.

Prove it they did. At first, they thought a \$50-per-head premium was good proof. Now, if they don't get double that they're disappointed.

"We get some Prime qualified in every group," Jim says. "You can never have too many, but we've always got some, and at least 50% CAB. We send everything on a grid, and they make the upper 90s (percent) on Choice, so those cattle are making it."

Don't forget mama

The Richerts didn't build a superior herd on carcass data alone though, knowing that each live calf adds to the bottom line. Bulls are turned out for a 60-day breeding window, and when calving season starts in March they expect 80% born in the first 30 days. Besides having excellent feet and legs and good udders, the cows are expected to raise a healthy calf that can earn premiums on the rail each year. Open cows, those experiencing calving difficulty or short on any other standards don't stay around.

Jim credits Angus seedstock breeders' commitment to calving ease and genetic improvement for much of his family herd's progress, but they recently took another step forward.

Selection decisions now incorporate the

GeneMax® (GMX) Focus™ genomic test from Zoetis.

"We did what everyone else was doing before GMX," he says. "When it came time to pick replacements, we'd gather them all together, and we'd eyeball them and select."

Upon Jay's suggestion to start using GMX, the Richerts now have a more accurate selection tool.

"In 2013 we kept the top 30 heifers," Jay says. "If we would have gone by sight alone, we probably wouldn't have picked half the same."

The proof

The reliability of genomics is already showing progress. Jay says those first GMX scores were in the 70th percentile, but their calves averaged in the 85th percentile last year. GMX results will soon be in on a third calf crop.

"This is the first group we've really gotten to feed with a test on their dams," Jay says. "Now we can cull off of the scores even better. When we first started, while the quality grades were there, we were still seeing too many Yield Grade (YG) 4 discounts. Now we can fine-tune carcass traits, limit fat and still get the quality we're targeting."

The men plan to keep improving until all replacements achieve GMX scores of at least 90, ideally 95. They know using the test in concert with focused sire selection and culling on carcass data will help them reach goals faster.

"We're looking at the numbers," Jay says. "When it comes to selection and improvement, GeneMax is a way we can get there faster. It's telling us we're going in the right direction."

Their plans don't include sharing the land with inferior animals.

"If you eliminate the stragglers, you can probably get the same result with 25% less and make the same amount of money with less cattle," Jim says. "Don't just get bigger, get better."

That has been the plan every day since converting valuable cropland back to pasture: Cows must add value to stay. Lots of neighbors questioned the Richerts' decision from the start, but Jim says today's premiums for quality justify their program.

"In this part of Oklahoma, you're not going to find many cowmen," he says, "but after the last few years, why would you do anything but raise cattle? You know, you've

got to stay with what works for you, but the people that diversified in this area are the best off."

For the Richerts, it's not only the premiums in the cattle market that make it worthwhile. It's their joy and satisfaction of working with cattle every day.

"It's a lot of fun," Jim says.

"We're looking at the numbers. When it comes to selection and improvement, GeneMax is a way we can get there faster. It's telling us we're going in the right direction."

— Jay Richert



Editor's Note: Katy Kemp is an industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB).

