

Pioneering Progress

Innovation a mainstay for retiring Illinois beef production educator.

Story & photos by **Barb Baylor Anderson**

When the Illinois Performance Tested Bull Sale comes around in 2010, sale manager Dave Seibert will be winding down his career. The University of Illinois Extension animal systems educator known for pioneering progress is retiring from his Extension position after 41 years of service to Illinois livestock producers. But he may still manage the sale for a couple of years.

Seibert will tell you the Illinois Performance Tested Bull Sale has been the most rewarding project of his career. Since becoming sale manager in 1991, 2,238 Angus and other-breed bulls with a gross value of more than \$4 million have been sold through the program.

Seibert is credited with creating a variety of

other programs that have helped advance the beef industry. His career emphasis has been on adult and youth livestock breeding and genetics education. He helps enhance

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management practices and works with producers to evaluate livestock for composition and to utilize forage, among other things. He has developed quality assurance and ethics clinics for 4-H club members and FFAers, regional cow-calf field days, area meats judging workshops and set up Illinois cow-calf teams and the Illinois Heifer Development Program. Other states have

even modeled programs after his efforts.

Additionally, he has conducted programming and studied beef production in Mexico, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay

and the Ukraine. Seibert has shared his international experiences and findings throughout the Midwest with 82 presentations to more than 3,100 people.

In honoring Seibert last year with the 2008 Illinois Friend of Agriculture Award, presenters noted, “Dave has implemented numerous new technologies and selection practices for the sale, including utilizing frame score windows, setting minimum pelvic measurements, requiring expected progeny difference (EPD) information and EPD group ranking and indexing, and ranking bulls on a six-trait performance power score. Bulls have been sold throughout the Midwest and from Maryland to Montana.”

Seibert has also introduced through the sale taking scrotal circumference measurements and setting minimums, comparing EPDs for carcass and reproductive traits, providing an EPD power score based on economically important traits and listing and ranking dollar value indexes (\$Values).

“You don’t buy brown-wrapper seed corn. Why should producers buy bulls without all the data we can collect? Requiring this information helps influence what purebred breeders do, their method of genetic selection and reproduction decisions,” he says. “We need to continue to gear up commercial producers to demand this information to impact what heifers breeders decide to retain. There is a cost to producers, but it is necessary to advance the industry.”

Seibert stresses that visual evaluation of bulls is still important to choosing sires, but he says gains made in data collection and technology will take the industry forward.

“We have to rely on more than just the ‘eye of the stockman.’ We have the scientific means for evaluation,” he says. “The advent of beef performance testing, adjusted weights and ratios in cow and sire summaries, breed association performance programs tied to pedigrees, were all critical advancements.

“Then came the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) that obtained some standardization to the mythology of evaluation records and provided consistency across breeds and testing methods,” he continues. “Central test stations and AI (artificial insemination) were also necessary advancements. Now we have economic-based indexes that allow producers to combine EPDs and compare animals for different phases of production and DNA marker assistance and marker panels.”

Roots run deep

Seibert has seen many changes in the cattle business throughout the years. He was raised in southern Illinois on a diversified livestock and grain farm, which included purebred Shorthorn cattle. All of the crops and forages



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raised on the farm, except wheat, were marketed through the livestock.

Seibert was involved with 4-H and FFA, and exhibited beef cattle during his youth. He has both bachelor's and master's degrees in animal science from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, where he also participated in, and later assisted with, the judging teams.

"Exposure to diverse species provided the background for majoring in animal science and for my career," he says. "The experience of competing in the International Livestock Exposition Contest in Chicago is one I will never forget. My team in 1964 placed fourth out of 32 teams."

Seibert married into the Angus business. His wife, Judy, grew up as part of Greenwood Angus Farm in Loogootee, Ill. The herd was started in 1902 and is one of the oldest in Illinois.

"In the mid- to late 1960s, I convinced my father-in-law, Stanley Schwarm, to head west for a larger-framed bull. We went to the Quirk Land & Cattle Co. Sale in Hastings, Neb., where we purchased a Marshall-bred bull that appeared large at the time. The bull added frame, but we needed more frame and performance," Seibert says. "We went to Oklahoma to performance-tested bull sales in Ringling and at the Noble Foundation."

Seibert and Schwarm met with Carlton and Murray Corbin of Stonebroke Angus Ranch, Tishomingo, Okla., and purchased a herd sire that won one of the Oklahoma tests. Carlton had previously attended a production sale at J. Garrett Tolan's operation near Pleasant Plains, Ill., and privately purchased Emulous of Sangamon. He took the bull to Oklahoma to develop the Emulous line found in many Angus pedigrees some 77 years later.

"My brother-in-law, Gene Schwarm, still runs some cattle on the farm," Seibert says. "I've stuck with beef cattle because I enjoy working with seedstock and commercial producers always looking at the next generation of offspring. It has always been a challenging industry. Few people get the opportunity to work for one entity during their whole career and work with the greatest people — agriculture producers. I hope I have had a positive influence on operations."

Breeding seedstock success

While the last 25-30 years have presented dramatic changes in his service to producers, Seibert believes the next 10 years will result

Predicting future progress

Dave Seibert expects future progress in the beef cattle industry to include:

- ▶ Beef will remain the most sought after protein source by consumers.
- ▶ Beef products must have marbling, be tender and lean.
- ▶ Many industry segments will exist. Those who excel within each segment will survive.
- ▶ Cattle must have predictability in all phases of production.
- ▶ Breeding and production will be based more and more on scientific technology.
- ▶ Functional traits will remain important.
- ▶ Cattle will need to fit and adapt to many environments in the U.S. and worldwide.

in even greater changes with DNA technology.

"Breeders must understand the next wave of genetic evaluation. Molecular breeding values (MBVs) will be combined with traditional EPDs to improve the accuracy of young animal selection," he says. "Future



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cattle selection will be all about increasing the predictability of the next generation."

Seibert predicts data will drive progress in all segments of the beef industry. Every phase of beef production will need to know more about the previous and/or next phases of the process, he says.

"Seedstock breeders must know how their genetics perform in the commercial industry

and in the feedlot. Commercial producers must be able to buy genetics with predictability rather than be the proving ground of new seedstock genetics," he explains. "Down the line, the feedlot industry must know about the genetics, health and performance of cattle they obtain, while packers must have more predictability at what point cattle will finish and grade on the rail."

Seibert encourages breeders to focus on performance and predictability of AI sires. He advises making selections based on objective measurements for traits that need to be emphasized, and process all information through the American Angus Association.

"Determine and analyze strong and weak genetics points so matings will complement each other. Every breeder must identify what niche they want to supply. That means producing the genetics that will add value at the point of marketing," he says. "I would like to see more Angus breeders emphasize marbling. It is far more economical to breed marbling into cattle than feed it."

Computer-driven breeding programs can help determine EPDs expected from matings, including marbling. Seibert says the Angus Society of Australia's program, Angus Mating Predictor, is a good example of such a program. He would like to see similar programs developed in the U.S.

"Finally, I would suggest seedstock producers scan all breeding animals for composition with as many progeny sent to the rail as possible to know the merit of the end product. Information should not stop at the time of sale without knowing the final value and composition," he says.



Seibert's suggestions for lasting success

- ▶ Find a niche and be the best, whether seedstock or commercial producer, backgrounder, grass-fed or organic producer, club calf or heifer developer or feedlot operator.
- ▶ Be a low-cost producer who can survive high-cost feed and low-price cattle markets.
- ▶ Have a workforce able to run your operation while you are on vacation.
- ▶ Be an environmentally friendly producer.
- ▶ Follow the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines when handling and caring for cattle.
- ▶ Have resource people with whom to bounce new ideas and to stay ahead in new technology use.