



Family Portrait

New tools from Certified Angus Beef LLC and Angus Genetics Inc. bring good news to Alabama cattlemen.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor

Last January, Jim Collins pulled a few tail hairs from 50 head of 14-month-old heifers. He sent those hair samples to Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI), the American Angus Association's genetic division, for GeneMax™ (GMX) DNA testing.

"We wanted a basic snapshot of the herd," Collins explains.

Instead, he and his father, Jimmy, got a whale of a family portrait. On the GeneMax index, which reports the genetic ability of the animal for postweaning gain and marbling, 40% of the heifers scored 89 or higher on a scale of 1 to 100. A whopping 75% of the straightbred-Angus heifers scored 74 or higher. This is compared to an industry average of 50.

"I was pleased," says Jim.

He should be. So should the customers who buy 135-140 head of the Cusseta, Ala., producers' bred heifers every year.

The news also bodes well for the feeders who buy the three loads of 700-pound (lb.)-plus preconditioned steers the Collinses offer through the Piedmont board sale every August.

"We wanted to use it as a benchmark for

this year's steers," says Jim. "With the erosion of equity in the feeding industry, feeders are looking for anything that is a sure bet, or at least a safe one."

The feeding side of the industry is precisely why Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) offers GMX testing. The company wants to increase the supply of the popular

brand, and marbling is the No. 1 reason animals fail to meet its strict quality criteria. The good news is that marbling is highly heritable, and genetics count for 40% of an animal's marbling potential.

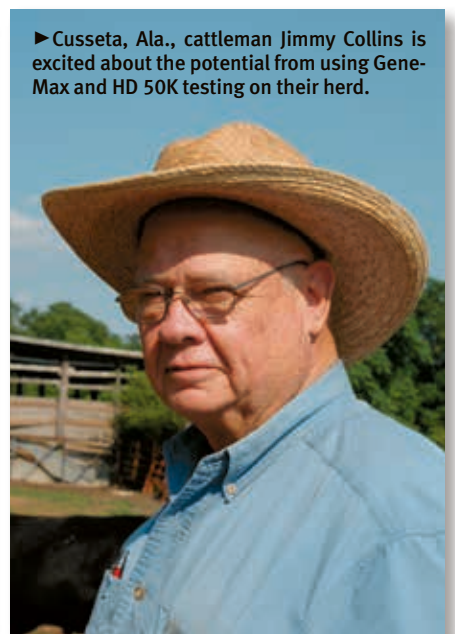
Useful within herd

The Collinses are more than happy

► Jim Collins says they did GeneMax testing on 50 heifers to get a snapshot of their herd.



► Cusseta, Ala., cattleman Jimmy Collins is excited about the potential from using GeneMax and HD 50K testing on their herd.



► **Above:** Jim and Jimmy buy young bulls and develop them themselves. This lends itself to HD 50K testing.

to share an overview of their GMX data, including the results from testing the rest of their replacement-quality heifers later in the spring, with their customers and potential customers. However, they also plan to put the information to work for themselves.

“We are using it as a benchmark on how our breeding program has progressed,” says Jim.

“For us, the information will probably get to be a criteria for selection,” says Jimmy. “We were already looking at fertility and longevity. By making balanced-trait selection for these things, we have maintained above-average growth and carcass quality, rather than extremes.”

Broader view

While the Collinses are excited about the gain and marbling information the GMX test provides, they aren't stopping there. They have already performed HD 50K testing on 42 young bulls and plan to use it on more, as well as recently purchased registered females.

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— Jimmy Collins

(expected progeny differences),” he adds. “For us it increases their accuracy.”

Tonya Amen, genetic service director for AGI, agrees. “Depending on the trait, the inclusion of the HD 50K test results provides the same level of EPD accuracy as if those young bulls already sired seven to 20 head of calves,” she says.

Jim adds, “We already buy flushmates and three-quarter brothers, but with HD 50K testing we can take even more of the variation out of our breeding program.”

“I'm convinced we will have more information than we would if we were doing our own performance test,” says Jimmy. “An on-farm test will show gain and temperament, but HD 50K shows their genetic weaknesses and strengths. We'll have a real good idea of what a bull will do before we even breed him.”

HD 50K testing, which is available through a partnership of AGI and Zoetis, provides genetic information on 14 production, efficiency, yield and quality traits.

If a bull does fit the Collins duo's specs and they do breed to him, they get a bonus, says Sally Northcutt, genetic research

DNA testing made easy

While the task of collecting DNA from cattle sounds daunting, it shouldn't. Jim Collins says he got the DNA required for the GeneMax™ test from 50 head of heifers using a Leatherman tool, Ziploc® bags and a permanent marker.

He used the Leatherman tool to pull the tail hairs from the heifers. The Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI) website says to pull at least 20 hairs for each sample and to be sure the root bulbs are attached to the hair.

Although you can apply the hair samples chuteside to the cards AGI provides, Collins prefers to put each sample in a Ziploc bag he has already marked with the heifer's identification (ID) number.

“If they aren't wet or have manure on them, they'll keep just fine in the bags,” he notes. “Then I can put the hair samples on the cards later when the wind isn't blowing and the cattle aren't hollering.”

The GeneMax test is \$17 per head.

For the HD 50K test, Jim and his father, Jimmy, did get their veterinarian to draw blood for the DNA samples when he was at their operation doing other work. However, hair samples are also accepted for the HD 50K test. Like the GeneMax cards, the HD 50K cards are ordered from and returned to AGI. The HD 50K test is \$75 per head.

For more information on GeneMax and HD 50K DNA testing, visit www.angus.org/AGI/default.aspx or www.CABpartners.com/Genemax.

director of AGI. “The Zoetis HD 50K results on registered-Angus bulls allow another GeneMax feature to be accessed called Sire Match. GeneMax can be used to assign sire identity to calves at no additional cost. This option is only available when potential sires have a Zoetis HD 50K test result and are registered through the Association.”

Even without the Sire Match feature, the Collinses really light up when they talk about the potential of using both GMX and HD 50K data.

“We can locate the extremes,” Jimmy says.

“We can eliminate the extremes,” adds Jim.

Still, the cattlemen emphasize that neither test provides all the answers.

“Be realistic about your expectations,” says Jim. “These are tools. The data we got this spring gave us one more reinforcement that we are going in the right direction. Our challenge is to continue to select bloodlines that complement each other.”

Jimmy adds, “This testing isn't going to cure all ills. So many people get hung up on marbling and beef they forget things like scrotal circumference. You've got to look down the road.”

The portraits the Collins duo has so far, though, make that road look mighty inviting.

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► Jim and Jimmy Collins plan to use HD 50K testing on recently purchased registered cattle.

