



# Field Notes

► by **Jared Murnin**, regional manager, and **Jim Shirley**, vice president of industry relations, American Angus Association

## Marketing your health program

*The benefits of a good herd health program can be realized throughout production to merchandising. Jared Murnin, American Angus Association regional manager, and Jim Shirley, Association vice president of industry relations, offer their insight on making the most of your herd health program.*

### How should producers start a herd health program?

**Jared Murnin:** The first step to implementing a health program is to consult your veterinarian. You and your veterinarian can sit down and talk about the diseases that you need to be vaccinating for and schedule a time in your production cycle when this fits best. He or she can also alert you as to the regional concerns you need to be aware of

and how to combat these issues. Be sure to include control of external and internal parasites in your herd health regimen.

### How can a herd health program affect an operation's finances?

**Murnin:** Herd health is most directly related to the economics of a herd or operation. Healthy cattle grow, gain and produce. Sick, diseased or dead livestock do

not increase the bottom line for a producer and, at the very least, create a bigger deficit between producer profitability and the fluctuating cattle market.

To most effectively implement a health program, it is important to see the value in both preventative plans and treatment plans. Think about this: Healthy cows are more productive, and they cost less than sick ones that need treatment. Furthermore, many reproductive diseases can go undetected. When faced with a herd health issue, producers often learn simple preventive measures would have saved money by avoiding higher treatment costs and losses due to lower conception rates and higher abortion rates.

Whether it is increased rate of gain, more productive cows or decreased mortality, a healthy herd is a more economical herd.

### Can producers use their herd health program as a marketing tool?

**Murnin:** It is important to let your current and potential customers know about your herd health program. In feeder calf sales, I have noticed a premium being paid for groups of calves that have been raised in a good health program.

In the seedstock industry, proper herd health is looked at as a customer service. It is something producers expect when they buy a bull or female. I don't see a premium being paid for bulls or females because of the herd health program, but it could potentially hamper a sale if your health program is not at the level of your competitors'.

As seedstock producers, it is also important to know about your customers' health programs and possibly build your program to further meet their needs or demands.

**Jim Shirley:** Absolutely. Customers don't want to buy problems; they expect seedstock producers to have a herd health system in place to catch those problems.

In an auction situation, you should include information about your health program in your sale book. Having your veterinarian explain your program will also be seen as a reputable "stamp of approval."

Think of herd health as a customer service issue. What extras can you offer your customers? Some seedstock producers have

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started testing for bovine leukosis virus (BLV), Johne's disease and bovine viral diarrhea (BVD). If that information is valuable to your customers, you may want to consider those types of tests, too.

**What role can the AngusSource® program play in helping producers market their healthy cattle?**

**Shirley:** AngusSource, a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Process Verified Program (PVP), allows producers to provide valuable information to their customers. In addition to documenting source, Angus-sired genetics and group age, the AngusSource Document can also be customized with additional information for feeder cattle or replacement females. Though not part of the PVP, this additional information can include performance

history and management practices such as your herd health program.

If you submit sale information, the AngusSource Document will be posted online for 90 days prior to the sale date and sent out to potential buyers through a weekly e-mail, thus allowing potential buyers to learn about your AngusSource-enrolled cattle, including their health information. To enroll in AngusSource, call (816) 383-5100.

**How can herd health influence the relationship between seedstock and commercial producers?**

**Murnin:** As a seedstock producer, your commercial customers often consider you a leader in the cattle industry. They often follow your lead and refer to you to make decisions that affect their operation. If you

have some knowledge on the subject and you can help your commercial customers, it can ultimately lead to future sales and loyalty to your genetic program in the future.

**Shirley:** All sectors of the industry, from seedstock to cow-calf to feedlot to processing, are based on the principle of trust. Do your customers trust that your product is what you say it is? Herd health programs help build that trust. They add credibility to your program, increase buyers' confidence in their purchasing decisions and help build customer loyalty.

It may not be the first thing that attracts buyers to your sale, but a good herd health program could be what keeps them coming back year after year.

