

# President's Perspective

A Q&A with Association President Ben Eggers.

Story & photos by *Shauna Rose Hermel*

**Q** What do you consider the greatest achievements/actions of the American Angus Association Board of Directors during your terms as a director and officer?

**A** 1. The directive to pursue multi-breed evaluation that was passed at the February 2006 meeting.

2. Bringing our National Cattle Evaluation (NCE) in-house, allowing us to be more efficient, to mine our own database for information, to develop the bioeconomic indexes and to develop the three-parent model for the computation of expected progeny differences (EPDs) on embryo transfer (ET) calves born out of registered Angus recipis.

3. The AngusSource® program.

4. The many changes and refinements in electronic data submission, both through AAA Login and Angus Information Management Software (AIMS), and the paperless registration option.

5. The recent changes in *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) specs, both the AngusSource option as the “first qualifier,” and the limits on ribeye area (REA) and hot carcass weight (HCW).

6. Ultrasound technology, which allows us to get a better characterization of the female contribution toward carcass traits.

7. The many enhancements to the junior program, especially the development of the Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) conferences and the addition of several “non-exhibitor” contests at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS).

8. Development of the Outreach Seminars, and now webcasts, to increase communication to the members, as well as the growth of the affiliate mailing list utilized by the *Angus Beef Bulletin*.

9. The “no paint” rule.

10. Increased emphasis and funding for the Angus Foundation.

11. The change from blood-typing to DNA parentage verification.

**Q** At the September 2006 Board Meeting, you initiated a half-day session that featured a panel of six commercial cattlemen moderated by Doug Parrett of the University of Illinois. What was your intent when scheduling the panel discussion?

**A** Despite commercial producers being the “bread and butter” basis of the Angus seedstock business, we had never had a forum to allow a group of them to make their views known to the Board. I believe the Angus breed has reached its current status by delivering Angus bulls to the commercial industry that help keep them profitable, and we should never stray from that mission. All of the Board Members interact with these producers, but I still thought it could be meaningful to get a progressive, geographically diverse group of them to visit with the Board on whatever issues they wanted to bring forward.

**Q** What were the biggest take-home messages?

**A** They are pleased with the data they get from the American Angus Association, and they would like for us to be the “one-stop shop” for beef cattle records for the beef industry. Most already utilize individual identification (ID) and individual performance records, and they are looking for a way to generate genetic predictions. One breeder is already computing his own within-herd EPDs. They also were emphatic in their desire for more data relating to maternal efficiency and fertility.

**Q** Were there any surprises to come out of that commercial panel?

**A** Despite many purebred breeders thinking we have too many numbers already, every one of these producers wanted more data, not less.

**Q** It was brought up that none of the Commercial Focus Group members put much emphasis on the \$Value indexes. Does that concern you?

**A** Not at all. From the beginning discussions on the \$B index, we all realized that the progressive commercial breeders who have been retaining ownership and collecting harvest data will still want to use individual EPDs to make directional change, because they know where they are at and what specific traits they need to improve.

I think we will see more commercial interest in the \$W index, but



the scenario is still the same. Differing feed resources, age of the females being bred, and many other factors will cause many commercial breeders to prefer a slightly different EPD package than what works perfectly for the scenario we use in the computation of \$W.

**Q Do you think the Association is in a position to assist commercial cattlemen to the extent necessary to keep them as customers?**

**A** Several of these breeders indicated they are looking to their seedstock suppliers to help them with data management. A logical option for the American Angus Association would be expansion of our Beef Records Service (BRS) program and/or our AIMS program to provide the data management they are looking for. And, this needs to include genetic predictions to aid them in replacement female selection.

It would be very valuable to many of them to develop a carcass EPD system that would incorporate the female side of the equation. Currently, the Association's carcass database is a sire model. With many of these commercial cows producing four to eight head of harvested steers in their lifetime, this could develop into a valuable resource, as well as increasing the accuracy values of the sires of those cows.

Although the Commercial Focus Group had not utilized the AngusSource program, they were all supportive of the concept. Many were already retaining ownership anyway, and participating in a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Process Verified Program (PVP) or a Quality Systems Assessment (QSA) program through their feedlot. The AngusSource program is more appealing to commercial producers who want to market their calves as calves or yearlings.

**Q The October *Angus Journal* presented a story on the Bell Ranch Project, through which the National Beef Cattle Evaluation Consortium (NBCEC) is establishing within-herd EPDs on commercial cattle. What does this mean relative to marketing registered Angus bulls in the future?**

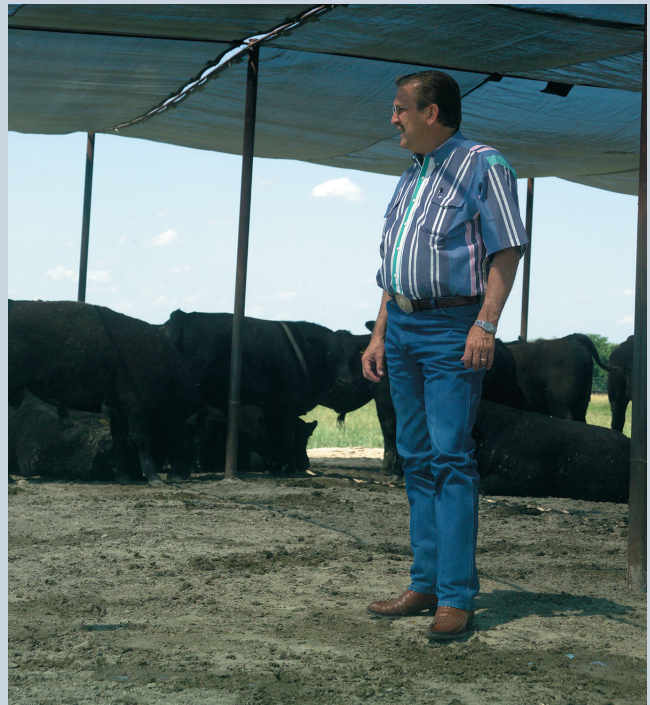
**A** Just as several members of the Commercial Focus Group pointed out to us, there is a need for commercial EPDs in the commercial industry. Many large herds already have, or are currently developing their own within-herd EPDs. Smaller and mid-size herds are looking for someone to supply this service.

In terms of marketing registered bulls, it means these herds will become much more focused on exactly what they want in the bulls they buy, and they will seek out the breeders and bloodlines that can provide it. I believe it will still be easier and cheaper for them to purchase their sire power than to create it themselves.

One of the members of the Commercial Focus Group indicated they were previously maintaining a small seedstock herd and raising their own bulls, but had moved toward buying bulls because they could key in on the traits they wanted to change, and they had much better selection. I see this as a common thought process among top-end commercial producers.

**Q Some members have shied away from giving genetic predictions on commercial cattle. What disadvantages and what advantages would it have for Angus producers?**

**A** The fear is that it would infringe on the demand for registered Angus seedstock ... much the same argument as was made



years ago that open artificial insemination (AI) would decrease the demand for registered Angus bulls.

I advocate giving EPDs for commercial females, and assume the male calves should all be steers anyway. This would give our top-end commercial breeders the ability to do a better job selecting replacements, whether from their own herd or from the marketplace.

Where I really think the Association and its members would benefit is that we would get much more meaningful data on the fertility and maternal traits from the commercial sector, with less "noise" in the database resulting from purebred data that is skewed by buying and selling females, when some sell to herds that turn in data and some to herds that do not.

We may also get a truer picture of fertility if it is being defined in a commercial herd environment, since that would often be a lower nutritional input environment and would usually involve synchronization programs. Donor females are another problem when applying fertility measures to seedstock herds that would not be a factor in commercial herd data.

**Q What is the biggest challenge facing the beef industry today?**

**A** Increasing quality and consistency of our product, while making it easier to prepare, and projecting a wholesome and nutritious image.

**Q How does the Association assist in overcoming that challenge?**

**A** CAB has already done much for the industry by proving consumers desire higher quality. At its September 2006 meeting, the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Board, with support of the Association Board, modified CAB product specifications by replacing the Yield Grade (YG) 3 or lower specification with a ribeye area specification of 10-16 square inches (in.) and a hot

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carcass weight specification of less than 1,000 pounds (lb.). And in November we'll consider a fat specification after reviewing additional research.

Our new specifications will start us toward addressing the consistency issues. Several CAB products have addressed the ease-of-preparation issue.

**Q** **Would you consider the change in CAB specifications as much of an industry-changing decision as the original implementation of the consumer-oriented brand specifications?**

**A** Very much so. Times have changed since the original specs were put in place. Carcass weights have increased, and beef is mostly sold as closely trimmed product in boxes, rather than as sides of beef. Those two dramatic changes in beef marketing are the reasoning behind these changes. Most of the complaints CAB has received have been related to wide variations in the size of cuts.

**Q** **Does it send a message to producers to avoid extremes?**

**A** It's more designed to reflect that we are listening to the consumer. In a perfect world, the 12- to 14-inch ribeyes would bring a higher premium yet, to give us a target to breed for, but I don't see that happening real soon.

**Q** **Will it help ensure that a greater percentage of cattle meeting CAB specs are truly of Angus genetics and not black-hided cattle of other breeds?**

**A** I think we're already sorting most of them out with the marbling requirement.

**Q** **You mention bringing the database in-house as one of the Board's greatest accomplishments. Industry-wide, one of the concerns facing the seedstock industry is finding a new generation of students interested in population genetics and establishing genetic predictions for beef cattle. What steps can we take, to ensure we have people to do genetic evaluations for the American Angus Association 20 years from now?**

**A** That's an excellent question, and one we haven't discussed enough at Board level. The basics of NCE could change dramatically, too, as we try to incorporate DNA markers into EPDs. I think I'll have to hand that one off to Jot and next year's Board.

**Q** **At the February 2006 Board meeting, the Board modified policy to allow multiple labs to submit ultrasound data to the Association for the compilation of Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR<sup>SM</sup>) and establishment of EPDs. Why was this move taken?**

**A** Several members expressed their desire to be able to use other labs, and after consultation with the experts in this field, the Board determined it could be done. The protocol is a fair bit more complicated now than it was with one lab, but the data is still sound in its ability to generate accurate EPDs for ultrasound traits. It has been implemented, and we are now receiving images from four different labs.

**Q** **There is some discussion and even an ad in the October Angus Journal pressuring the Board to have the Association finance in total the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS), for which it expends in excess of \$250,000 a year. Would you care to comment?**

**A** Being treasurer of the 2004 NJAS, I can certainly see both sides of this pancake. I really believe, with the last changes made by the Board, that we are where we need to be. Basically, all the host state is responsible for now are the decorations, exhibitor gifts and whatever free meals they want to provide. Each state or region would have definite opinions on these three areas and would want to give their show the "flavor" of their state or region. Even if the American Angus Association did provide the basic funding for decorations, exhibitor gifts and meals, the host states would probably decide they wanted to spend just a little bit more to do it just like they want it and, pretty soon, we would be back where we are today.

At some point, some host state is going to have to draw the line on spending and cut back somewhere, probably on meals. I don't think this will hurt the show one bit. It will still be the largest and best single-breed beef cattle event in the world.

**Q** **One of the things you discussed when you came home from the World Angus Conference in South Africa last year was the push to have an international Angus recordbook. Do you think it will become a reality?**

**A** Australia is very aggressive in its efforts to become the world center for Angus performance records. At this point, the field is wide open, and our Association is their only possible competition. Of course, our Association is hampered on the international front as we are the only one in the world that does not include Red Angus.

**Q** **How do we encourage young people to come back to the farm?**

**A** You know, we hear this a lot, about how tough it is for young people to get started farming or ranching, but I don't think it's really changed much. It was that way in the '70s when I made the decision to work for others rather than try to make it on my own. My father worked at the local shoe factory in the '40s until he got his farm paid down enough he could farm full-time. My grandfather before him worked at the milling company in town in the '20s and '30s until he had his farm paid down enough he could farm full-time.

Most young people today will have to have either an outside partner or an off-farm job for a while before they are able to support themselves on the farm or ranch. And, to get it done, they are going to have to be competent, focused and driven, because it still won't be easy.

**Q** **What are the biggest challenges facing members of the American Angus Association?**

**A** Despite everything going so well right now, there are many challenges on the horizon. Most have to do with how good things are now. That can make us a little complacent and less willing to jump out in front with new ideas for fear we'll do something wrong and lose ground. The risks taken in the '70s — such as CAB, open AI, purchasing the *Angus Journal*, and the beginning of

National Cattle Evaluation — have put us in the forefront today. We have to stay just as aggressive to remain at the top.

Keeping or expanding our commercial market share, incorporating DNA technology into our breeding systems, and even the definition of *Angus* are some of the challenges I expect to be front and center for future Boards.

**Q** How can the Association assist its members in meeting those challenges?

**A** The Board and the staff must remain vigilant for opportunities to expand our influence.

**Q** For those considering running for the Board in the future, what was the biggest challenge you faced in being a member of the Board?

**A** The biggest challenge for me was getting up there behind that microphone, in front of all my friends and competitors, and “selling” myself to them. Since I tend to be more introspective, this was quite a challenge. The public speaking half of my family always reminds me to “stick with what you know,” and the comfort level will be much better. And, if anyone reading this has those same qualms, I would remind them that public speaking is a very small part of serving on the Board.

I would like to see more breeders running for the Board. The decisions made do have an effect on all of our livelihoods, and the experience is invaluable. It will cause you to look at the industry in a whole different light.

**Q** What advice would you offer incoming Board members?

**A** I heard Brian McCulloh say this several years ago when asked that question, and I still think it’s the best advice for people serving on any Board:

1. Think critically.
2. Vote independently.
3. Achieve consensus (meaning when it doesn’t come out like you wanted it to, you still need to accept it and move on).

And, I have never forgotten the response given to me by a past president when I asked him for his support when I first ran for the Board. He said, “I certainly will, but with one condition. You have to promise me you won’t *try* to become president.”

He went on to explain that he wanted me to debate and vote for what I thought was right, and never let my vote or thinking be swayed by what was popular or politically correct. He wanted me to listen to all sides of the issue and then do whatever I thought was the right thing for the Association and the breeders. As he said, if you still happen to become president, you will feel much more comfortable with it.

**Q** How do you want to be remembered as a president of the Association?

**A** I’d like to be remembered as someone who encouraged input, who made sure we had the facts we needed, and who led discussion in terms of the future impact of whatever decision was at hand.

**A**

## A Tribute to the Stockman

Behold The Stockman! Artist and Artisan.

He may be polished, or a diamond in the rough — but always a gem.

Whose devotion to his animals is second only to his love of God and family.

Whose gripping affection is tempered only by his inborn sense of the true proportion of things.

Who cheerfully braves personal discomfort to make sure his livestock suffer not.

To him there is rhythm in the clatter of the horse’s hoof, music in the bleating of the sheep and in the lowing of the herd.

His approaching footsteps call forth the affectionate whinny of recognition.

His calm, well-modulated voice inspires confidence and wins affection.

His coming is greeted with demonstrations of pleasure, and his going with evident disappointment.

Who sees something more in cows than the drudgery of milking, more in swine than the grunt and squeal, more in the horse than the patient servant, and more in sheep than the golden hoof.

Herdsmen, shepherd, groom — yes, and more.

Broadminded, big-hearted, whole-souled; whose life and character linger long after the cordial greeting is stilled and the hearty handshake is but a memory; whose silent influence forever lives. May his kind multiply and replenish the earth.

— H.W. Mumford. 1917.

