

THE BIRTHPLACE OF ANGUS

Angus is gaining ground in the Scottish beef industry.

by Kasey Brown, associate editor

"Haste ye back" is a common theme in Scottish hospitality. The people are warm and dry (humored), in direct contrast to the country's cool and damp climate. The climate and terrain are excellent for raising cattle, but instead of seeing pastures dotted with black cattle like you often see in the United States, the countryside is dotted with a bit of everything.

Despite originating in Scotland, the Angus breed of cattle is the fourth-most-popular breed on the island. The breed is steadily growing in registrations, but the industry as a whole can explain why the breed's popularity is tepid.

The big picture

The Scottish beef industry faces many of the same challenges and opportunities as that of the United States. Emma Penny, editor of the *Farmers Guardian*, explains that due to the moderate climate and hilly terrain, Scotland has about double the livestock stocking rates as the rest of the United Kingdom (UK). Land competition is high, and this results in a higher concentration of co-ops. Cereal grains are intensely farmed.

While Scots face challenges that sound familiar, like far distance from markets, an aging farming population, competition with the oil industry for labor, and political uncertainty, Penny says Scottish farmers are resilient, cohesive and open to change.

Nigel Miller, president of the National Farmers Union Scotland, says the average herd size of cow-calf operations, called suckler herds in Scotland, is about 52-53 head. Livestock claim about 86% of the agricultural land in Scotland, and rough

grazing accounts for 2.8 million hectares, which is the equivalent of just less than 7 million acres.

With his dry humor, Miller plays the pessimistic Scottish farmer well, saying, "Scottish ag is lousy at making money." He notes that the top one-third of upland cow-calf herds are profitable.

However, the Scottish farmers do get some aid from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the European Union (EU) subsidy program. First established in 1957, it currently accounts for almost 39% of the EU budget.

Miller notes that the 2015 budget focuses on active farming, and beef calves receive about \$123 U.S. equivalent, or €100.

James Withers, CEO of Scotland Food and Drink, plays the optimist counterpart to Miller's pessimist.

"We need more innovation, collaboration, scale and skills for growth," says Withers. "The food and drink industry has many growth opportunities."

He suggests using Scotland's more popular export, whisky, as an industry example. While the small country has limits on what it can produce, adding value is critical, he says.

Like the United States, local food popularity is a growing trend in Scotland. While five years ago, consumers would pay more to know where their food comes from, now that is expected. However, Withers notes, they will pay for the story.

This contributes to why Scotch Beef PGI has done so well. It is a differentiated product that sets Scotch beef apart from that of other nationalities. However, it is a brand that sets itself apart by location and production





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► James Withers, CEO of Scotland Food and Drink, says there is opportunity in differentiating agricultural products.

practices, but not by the end product's quality. For more information on Scotch Beef PGI, check out "Quality Meat Scotland" on page 308 in this issue.

The Scottish beef industry does not have a grid system where producers are paid by carcass quality. There are no quality grades, so farmers are paid by carcass weight only. With that said, Miller notes that consumers are saying carcass weights are getting too big, and Scotland is importing more cattle.

Because farmers are paid by the pound, uniformity isn't necessary. Multi-colored herds speckle the countryside, and a heavy Continental influence is easily apparent. British breed associations must add value to increase registrations and breedings.

Angus in its birthplace

Ron McHattie, CEO of the Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society, says the Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society is improving its marketability with estimated breeding values [(EBVs), which are estimates of an animal's own merit, compared to the expected progeny differences (EPDs) used in the United States that estimate the animal's value as a parent] and DNA technology.

The United Kingdom has a robust traceability program in place called the British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS). This program issues a passport for every calf born and traces the calf's movements from birth to plate. The Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society is adding more information to that with the goal of DNA sampling every pedigree-Angus calf to raise the bar in pedigree validation, adds McHattie.

He explains that with more than 16,000 pedigree calves registered, it is the second-largest beef breed society in the United

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► Scottish cattle genetics are marketed heavily in the showing. Here, Mark Wattie of Mains of Tonley shows off a bull in their successful show string.



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Kingdom, behind Limousin. Commercially, Angus is also gaining popularity. More than 270,000 Angus-sired BCMS passports are issued each year, the only breed to be increasing yearly. This has shown a 3% increase year over year. Like the United States, the herd size is an issue. It is static to declining in Scotland, but Angus market share is rising.

McHattie says Angus calves garner premiums at every stage of the life cycle, not just at the processing plant, because Angus cattle are moderate-sized and low-maintenance with increased longevity. They also finish well on grass or grain.

He adds that the Society has built a strong relationship with supermarkets like Waitrose and Marks & Spencer, as well as restaurants, farm shops and butchers, to build consumer demand to a level where beef can command a higher selling price.

To read about a current Angus breeder, check out “Young Herd Performance Focus Generates Quick Success” on page 314.

For the future of the breed, McHattie says, “Our improved strategic alliances with the retail sector will keep the breed moving forward. We are the first to introduce BreedPlan Performance Recording to the UK, and the first to introduce DNA testing of Aberdeen-Angus beef. We also take and store a DNA sample of every pedigree-registered calf. We will be the No. 1 beef breed in the UK.”



Editor’s Note: For more about the Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society, see the organization’s homepage at www.aberdeen-angus.co.uk/. For more information about BreedPlan, visit <http://breedplan.une.edu.au/index.php>.



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History of the breed

Long before George Grant brought four Angus bulls to the heartland of Kansas, the Aberdeen-Angus breed was developed in the early part of the 19th century in northeast Scotland. These polled black animals were called “doddies” and “hummlies.”

The Herd Book was established in 1862 and the Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society in 1879, according to the Aberdeen-Angus Society’s website. Three men are credited with establishing the breed — Hugh Watson, William McCombie and Sir George Macpherson-Grant.

Hugh Watson became tenant of Keillor Farm in Angus in 1808. He gathered stock widely and produced cattle of outstanding quality and character, and he is often regarded as the father of the breed. Watson’s favorite bull was Old Jock, a son of Grey-Breasted Jock, who was one of the first animals listed in the Herd Book.

Lesley Walker, business adviser in economic development for the chief executive on the Angus Council, says that another of Watson’s notable animals was a cow, Old Granny, which was born in 1824 and said to have lived to 35 years of age and to have produced 29 calves. The pedigrees of the many Angus cattle today can be traced back to these two animals. With the exception of Black Meg 43, more Angus cattle trace back to Old Granny than any other single cow of the breed. She is considered by some as the founder of the breed.

Because of this, Walker hints that the breed’s name should technically be Angus-Aberdeen cattle instead of Aberdeen-Angus.

Another founder, William McCombie, took the farm of Tillyfour in Aberdeenshire in 1824 and founded a herd from predominantly Keillor bloodlines. His well-documented closed breeding produced quality cattle that he showed widely in England and France. The reputation of the Aberdeen-Angus breed was founded on the efforts of the McCombie family.

Sir George Macpherson-Grant returned to his inherited estate at Ballindalloch, on the River Spey, from Oxford in 1861 and took to refining the breed that became his life’s work for almost 50 years.

The website asserts that in those early days, Britain was regarded as the fount of Aberdeen-Angus genetics and leading world breeders sourced stock from Britain. The export market has continued to favor the Aberdeen-Angus breed, and now breeders look worldwide to source the very best genetics.