

by Dan Kirkpatrick

THE STRAIT RANCH



Fertility and proper animal nutrition are the building blocks of a high-level management program on which Strait Ranch of Florence, Kan., is founded.

This emphasis on fertility and proper nutrition is evident in the ranch's current management program and in its long-term goals.

"One of our future goals is to reduce our calving time. Our goal is a 45-day period. Another goal is learning how to provide proper nutrition in an economical manner—more so than we've done in the past," says Randy Mills, managing partner of the central Kansas commercial Angus operation. He and originator and co-owner Frank Strait of El Dorado, have established these and other goals they want their herd to achieve in the future.

"Proper mineral nutrition can be a great asset to any cattle producer. Healthy cows produce healthy calves . . . It makes the whole facet of management seem much easier for not that great an expense."

Good goals to be sure, but not easy to attain when your herd numbers more than 1,000 head of commercial Angus brood cows, heifers and bulls. The herd started in 1956 when Strait purchased over 100 registered Angus cows.

Mills, Strait's son-in-law, assumed management of the operation in 1972. By looking at Randy, and talking with him, one would assume he has been around a cattle operation all his life. Such is not the case. He was raised in the town of Ellsworth, and before taking over the ranch, his only previous exposure to agriculture was working on a farm a couple summers when he was in his teens.

Willing to Learn

Mills graduated from Kansas State University, Manhattan, with a degree in business. Upon leaving college, he was employed by RCA, in Bloomington, Ind., as a coordinator for production management. After three years there, he returned to Kansas to start managing the ranch.

"Some people say you can take a country boy out of the country, but you can't take a city boy out of the city, and put him in the country. When I first came here, I tended to agree with that. But overall, working on the ranch has been a very good experience. I've learned a great deal in my time here," Mills says.

Two of the keys to his smooth and efficient operation of the herd is this willingness to learn, and his open-mindedness. Mills says he is constantly seeking information that will help him make correct decisions in the management of the herd. Although

he has been running the ranch for 11 years, he concedes he still has a lot to learn about the cattle industry.

His willingness to try new management tools is one of the main reasons for the high level of management that exists on the

"When we started the herd we had a split program (spring and fall calving), but it really wasn't a split program. It was just an elongated calving season."

ranch. This high-level management is especially evident in the operation's work with minerals and animal fertility.

Mineral Nutrition Important

Mills says, "I'm a firm believer in mineral nutrition. I'm interested in trace minerals as well as the main minerals, calcium and phosphorus. I'm very interested in, and concerned about all facets of mineral nutrition for cattle growth and reproductive abilities."

Several tests are performed each year on the pasture and some of the 2,000 acres of brome hay, to determine which nutrients are lacking in the feedstuffs. A supplemental mineral ration, providing those trace minerals deficient in the hay and pasture, is then

processed with their own in-house mixer.

Determining mineral nutrition requirements is a very individualized process. Mills stresses that a ration that works for Strait Ranch might not work for another herd.

"Most cattle people use minerals in their herds, but I'm talking about a mineral program that will fit their needs. It is something producers will have to do some research on to see what their needs might be. There is no stereotyped mineral program available. There are some minerals that universities and feed companies say you don't need. I believe to the contrary. Our cow herds need different minerals during different times of the year. For example, it's a hot, dry year

formance and healthier calves. Proper mineral nutrition makes the whole facet of management seem much easier, for not that great an expense."

Emphasis on Fertility

Proper nutrition contributes to high fertility, something that Mills demands of the bulls and cows in the Strait Ranch herd. High fertility is essential in getting as many cows as possible bred in the shortest period of time, one of the primary objectives at the ranch. That is why when selecting bulls, Mills looks for, above anything else, good scrotal circumference measurements, good fertility test results and a strong sex drive.

High-level management has brought this 1,000-head commercial Angus operation close to realizing its goals, established by managing partner Randy Mills.

they need different types of minerals than in a cool, wet year."

Mills says trying to find information on trace minerals can be very frustrating at times, because there isn't much work being done on the subject at major land-grant universities.

"It's been very difficult finding information for mineral nutrition for a range cattle situation. I feel people working in the area of total animal nutrition should possibly research and update their theories."

Work in the area of proper animal nutrition will continue at Strait Ranch. "We've

"Purebred breeders need to strive to produce an animal that can reproduce itself efficiently. If an animal can't reproduce naturally, it doesn't make any difference if it cost \$10,000, it's not worth a darn to us."

been supplementing minerals since I've been here. We've done more intensive work on it as far as research and trials in mineral nutrition in the last seven years. We've seen some positive results from our work in the last two years in the area of overall herd health," Mills says.

"Proper mineral nutrition can be a great asset to any cattle producer. Healthy cows produce healthy calves. We have less sickness in our cattle, better reproductive per-

"Good scrotal circumference is very important to us. A measurement can be too small, and by the same token, it can be too big. A circumference of 33 centimeters is too small, 44 centimeters is too big. An optimum measurement falls between the range of 38 to 40 centimeters. I believe scrotal circumference and libido are strongly related. If a bull shows any lack of sexual desire, I would just as soon get rid of him."

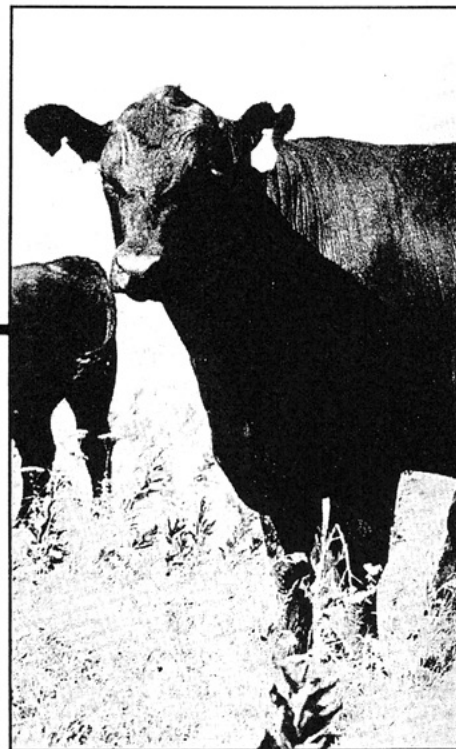
Unfortunately, Mills sometimes has a hard time finding what he wants when looking for bulls. He finds many purebred producers don't feel a need to fertility test their bulls and measure them for scrotal circumference.

Says Mills, "If I know a place doesn't have scrotal measurements on their bulls, I would just as soon not even go to their sale. The problem is not enough people want the measurements to force purebred breeders to take the time, and spend the money to do it."

In addition to their stringent fertility requirements when selecting bulls, Mills says, "We watch birth weights and calving ease. Overall, we want bulls with good general appearance, who have the ability to travel well in the pasture and exhibit soundness for breeding."

Sixty-Day Calving Season

Emphasis on high fertility among the ranch's cattle has brought the herd close to realizing Mills' goal of reducing the calving season to 45 days.



Strait Ranch steers leave the central Kansas pastures as long yearlings. For 15 years they went to the same buyer in Illinois, until his death three years ago. A feedlot in Nebraska has purchased the steers two of the last three years. Mills says these are indications of the quality of steers raised in the herd.

"When we started the herd we had a split program (spring and fall calving), but it really wasn't a split program. It was just an elongated calving season."

Now Strait Ranch calves only in the fall, and for the third consecutive year, calving will take place in a 60-day period. Mills says the herd will remain at 60 days for a while, because it took a lot of pain and work to get down that far.

Bulls are left with the cows for 60 days. Heifers are exposed to the bulls for 32 days prior to the cows' exposure. Mills says he has been running a conception rate of about

70 percent with his heifers over the last two years. During the calving season, the last heifer will calve about 21 days before the first cow.

"An Angus cow is going to calve five days before the gestation table says she will. Unless there's something wrong, you can bet your bippy that's when she is going to calve. It's good to be able to give those heifers the extra attention they sometimes need," says Mills.

Angus are Easy to Handle

High fertility is one of the reasons the Strait Ranch herd is comprised solely of purebred Angus cattle.

Mills says, "From a management standpoint, Angus are very easy to handle, because of their fertility, good mothering ability, high carcass quality and good feed efficiency. But the biggest advantage of raising straight-bred Angus is their saleability. We haven't had any problems marketing our cattle. There are many different types of markets that Angus cattle fall into. One of these is the commercial heifer market. We feel that due to all the cross breeding going on, some day producers on the commercial level will need to come back to the basics. We're hoping that at that time we can offer people a group of fairly high-quality heifers."

Mills adds, "Mr. Strait was instrumental in originally getting Angus cattle on the ranch, and in building a quality herd as time



"Our goal above any other is proper management and effective use of our unit," says Mills. "Good management is one of the keys to the future, and one of the keys to staying in this business."

has passed. He has given his complete support in the operation of the ranch, and has been very understanding when I've tried new concepts."

Maintaining a 1,000-head cow herd takes a lot of time and good, dependable people to help with all the work that goes with it. Mills has five people working for him on a full-time basis, as well as two others doing odd jobs for the summer.

"I have some exceptional people working for me. They have been a great asset. It wouldn't be possible for me to run this place without them."

Don't Forget Commercial Man

Mills says modern technological developments, such as embryo transfer, have contributed to great advances in the purebred industry. He says such advances are good for the business as long as purebred producers don't forget the primary objective of commercial producers: To get a live calf out of every cow, in the most economical way possible.

"Purebred producers have made some great strides in the last 10 to 15 years. I think commercial producers are still interested in a good, sound animal that has the ability to breed on the range or the farm. An animal not only has to be fertile, but it also has to have some genetics behind it. Purebred breeders need to strive to produce an animal that can reproduce itself efficiently. If an animal can't reproduce naturally, it doesn't make any difference if it cost \$10,000, it's not worth a darn to us."

Management is the Key

A high level of management has brought Strait Ranch a long way, and it will take it even further. Eventually the herd will achieve the goals mapped out for it by a man who continues to learn more about the cattle business every day.

Stated simply, Mills says, "Our goal, above any other is proper management and effective use of our unit. Good management is one of the keys to the future, and one of the keys to staying in this business." **AJ**