

# NEMO Finds Quality



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

Small-scale producers work together in search of postweaning information.

by *Chelsea Good*

Ten years ago, northeast Missouri producers dreamed of a way to learn how their calves performed after they left the farm. When they shared those visions with their veterinarian, she did more than just listen.

“People were telling me, they wished they knew how their cattle performed in the feedlot,” Imogene Latimer says. Most of them lacked the volume to deal directly with feedlots, and Latimer had the same problem with her own herd near Hunnewell, Mo.

She knew the University of Missouri Extension was trying to organize a network of alliances to

help smaller producers realize strength in numbers and develop value-based cattle marketing programs.

With the university’s help, Latimer and friends started the Northeast Missouri Premier Beef Marketers group in 1999. One of six such groups statewide, they decided early on to simplify the acronym to “NEMO,” though it is separate from the older NEMO Beef Cattle Improvement Association.

The group commingles its calves for backgrounding, then sells to feedlots in uniform lots while negotiating to get information feedback. It also sends some calves to Iowa’s Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity.

“We wanted to see the data and look at how we could improve,” Latimer says. “Really, we just wanted to learn, and if we make some money in the process, that’s great.”

Prior to NEMO, most of the members sold all their calves at weaning.

“When Imogene told me about the idea, I was interested because we had always



**“We wanted to breed the best, because they all eat about the same amount of feed,”**

— *Al Meyers*

► Involvement in Northeast Missouri Premier Beef Marketers (NEMO) helps Al Meyers gauge how his herd’s genetics perform in customers’ herds.

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sent our calves to the sale barn. We never knew how they did from then on,” says Bob Vannoy, Shelbyville, Mo., a charter member.

### Changing for the better

As the producers began receiving feedlot and carcass information back on their calves, they began to make adjustments.

“We became more aware of some of the things we should be doing,” Vannoy says. In his operation, that meant some feeding adjustments, but the biggest change was gearing genetic decisions toward a carcass quality focus.

Luckily, a neighboring seedstock producer and NEMO member knew about quality.

In 1995, Al Meyers and his son Albert started the Double A Angus Ranch, based on land near Shelbyville, Mo. They chose the Angus breed for its carcass traits.

“Comparing several breeds, it became obvious that Angus had set the benchmark others were trying to follow,” Meyers says. “I spent 31 years with Anheuser-Busch, where ‘quality not quantity’ was the motto,” he says. His son still works at the St. Louis, Mo., brewery, and the motto has filtered into the seedstock operation.

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► Bob Vannoy has discovered the drive toward producing more CAB animals takes commitment and patience, but seeing grid premiums for Choice and better cattle led him to put more emphasis on quality.

feed,” he says. In 2000, the Meyers began using ultrasound as a tool for carcass improvement and added another dimension by selling beef to friends in the St. Louis area.

“We have the carcasses graded by our Extension beef specialist,” Meyers says. “It helps us keep an eye on quality and gives us more information to share with seedstock customers.”

NEMO involvement helps Double A gauge how its genetics perform in customers’ herds.

“I keep leaning on them to feed me the data,” Meyers says. That way, he can better suit their current and future needs, beyond the basic visual herd appraisals. “We need to know where they are and how to get them to where they need to be. Sure, you have to cater to your customer, but at the same time you need to help them move in the right direction.

“When you go out and look at their herds and talk to them,” he continues, “you learn what you need to supply for them to work toward that *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) type of animal.”

Latimer and Vannoy have discovered the drive toward producing more CAB animals takes commitment and patience.

“We’ve found that you don’t just need marbling on the bull side; you have to work it in on the female side as well,” Latimer says. “It all just takes a lot of time. Sometimes someone in the group will get a little too anxious for change and they try to single-trait select. That never works.”

Meyers agrees, but that never means backing away from marbling. Although it takes time, he says the surest way to progress is to keep the heifers out of the quality-oriented bulls and breed them back to other balanced, but high-marbling sires.

“Oftentimes it takes at least two generations to get the real bang for your buck,” Meyers says. “And the more consistent your genetics are, the more predictable and profitable their offspring will be.”



► Producers formed NEMO because they wanted the information to improve quality.

Retaining ownership of cattle on feed, as many NEMO producers do, goes beyond selling calves to the same buyer every year. It lets them participate directly in the added value from performance and quality, Latimer says. Nearly all NEMO cattle have been sold through grid marketing.

"It's not like we have a high percentage of (USDA) Prime," Latimer says. "We learned pretty quickly that kind of change doesn't happen overnight. But we have built the genetics to make selling on a grid economical."

Vannoy says just seeing those grid premiums for Choice and better cattle led him to put more emphasis on quality. "It's been a good program for us," he says. "Most of the cattle we've retained ownership in have shown a profit at the feedlot."

### **Working toward the goal**

NEMO has exceeded Latimer's expectations in some ways. By putting together uniform groups and increasing their quality, producers get more than data from packers. One producer knew from past data that calves from one sire tended to marble well and quickly, but could get into yield grade (YG) problems. Latimer talked to the feedlot and recommended those

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calves for sorting to avoid overfinishing.

"They honored the request to sort, even though they hadn't done that in the past," she says. Another time, Latimer talked a yard into incorporating ultrasound into their sorting process. Feedlots appreciate "inside information" on the calves they feed, she adds.

By joining together to market their calves through the NEMO alliance, producers have more say with feedlots, partly because they offer more calves.

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But quantity isn't the objective. Producers formed NEMO because they wanted the information to improve quality. With an increased focus on carcass-oriented Angus genetics, NEMO producers are working together toward that ultimate goal.

