

Plugged In

Increasing numbers of agriculturalists are conducting business electronically.

by Jim Offner

More farms and ranches than ever are riding the high-speed information superhighway, and they say they're not about to turn back.

According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) study, which the agency's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) published in August, high-speed Internet usage among agricultural operators leaped from 13% in 2005 to 27% in 2007. Seven percent of farms with Internet access reported cable, satellite and wireless as their Internet mode; however, satellite and wireless connections had doubled their 2005 levels.

About half, or 47%, of U.S. farms with Internet access were still relying on dial-up connections, although that figure had shrunk from 69% in 2005.

Some of that growth, according to the USDA, is attributable to the web's increased multiple reach into rural areas. Fifty-five percent of farms in the U.S. currently have Internet access, compared with 51% in 2005. Sixty-three percent of farms have access to a computer in 2007, compared with the 2005 level of 59%. The proportion of U.S. farms owning or leasing a computer in 2007, at 59%, is up slightly from 55% in 2005. Farms

using computers for their farm business increased 3 percentage points from 2005, to 35% in 2007.

Internet usage among large-scale farms is most widespread, according to NASS figures, with 80% of farms with sales and government payments of \$250,000 or more having at least one computer and 75% with Internet access. Internet accessibility shrinks with the size of operations. For farms with sales and government payments between \$100,000 and \$249,999, 70% have computer

capability, 51% are using a computer for their farm business, and 61% have Internet access. For farms with sales and government payments between \$10,000 and \$99,999, 62% reported having computer access, 57% own or lease a computer, 36% use a computer for their farm business, and 53% have Internet access.

In the livestock area, by comparison, 62% have computer access — up 3% in the last two years — and 55% have Internet capability.

Find out more

For information about AIMS, visit www.angus.org/aims or do a back issue search at www.angusjournal.com for the keyword "AIMS."

For information on AAA Login, visit www.angusonline.org or do a back issue search at www.angusjournal.com for the keywords "AAA Login" and "Member Logon."

For personal assistance, call 816-383-5100 and request software support, specifying whether you are interested in information regarding AIMS or AAA Login.

Submitting Angus records

For Angus ranches, increased use of the Internet has led to unprecedented efficiencies in how they can submit information to the Association and store it, says Bill Bowman, American Angus Association vice president of information and data management.

Of the 324,935 registrations processed through the end of August for fiscal year 2007 (Oct. 2006-Sept. 2007), 65% were submitted to the Association electronically via Angus Information Management Software (AIMS), AAA Login (www.angusonline.org) or some other means. That represents an 8% increase in electronic submissions compared to the same period in FY 2006.

Over 70% of the weaning weights and more than 80% of the yearling weights submitted for Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®) from October 2006 through August 2007 were submitted electronically (up 5.4% and 4.5%, respectively), while 69% of AI certificates were processed electronically (up 3%).

“It has improved efficiency of data collection and processing enormously, both in the time it takes the producer to send the data to us and the time it takes us to process it once it gets here,” Bowman says. “Besides gaining back the time the file would have spent in the mail, we can process those entire files in a matter of moments if everything is correct.”

Although some ranchers continue to submit data via a paper-based system, Association members who file information electronically — through either AAA Login or AIMS — enjoy the advantages of speed and minimize the risks for errors, Bowman says.

“If you would submit a file today by the close of business, for example, you’d be able to access that information on the animal the next morning,” he says, explaining the process by which members submit pedigree information, weights and measures to the Association for processing into within-herd selection tools, such as ratios, and across-herd selection tools, such as expected progeny differences (EPDs) and dollar value indexes (\$Values).

“The use of that information is really important for producers if they’re preparing those animals for sale, for example, or preparing advertising or sale books,” he continues. “The ability to get that information processed and get it back quickly is very important.”

Producers who store their registrations electronically rather than requesting a registration “paper” be mailed to them at the time of registration, have the added convenience of being able to request printing of the “paper” with current performance information at a more meaningful time or to electronically transfer the paper to a new owner upon sale of the animal. That, too, has created some real efficiencies, Bowman says.

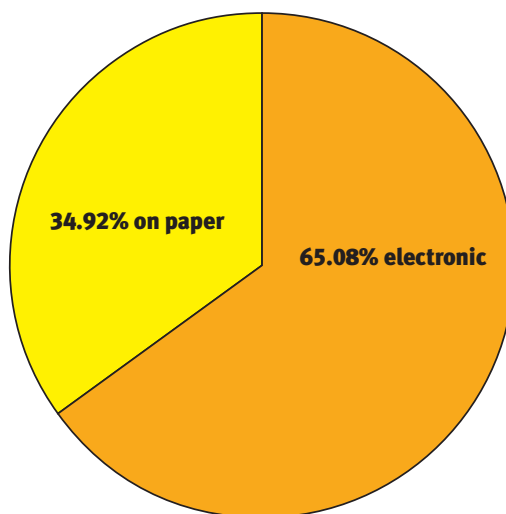
Producers find advantage

“It’s been a real blessing for us,” says Tammi Sitz, Sitz Angus Farm, Harrison, Mont., referring to the electronic submissions. “The turnaround time has been very short. It’s just been a more efficient system.”

The AIMS program has been central to the improvement in efficiency, she adds. And quality service from Association staff has also been a factor.

“If I have any problems, I just call down

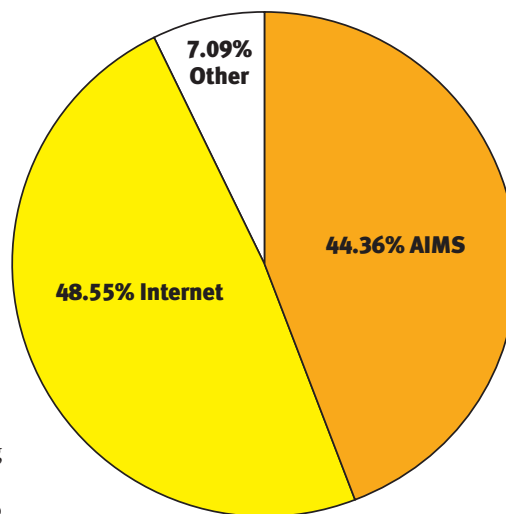
Fig. 1: Percent of registrations submitted to the American Angus Association electronically vs. submitted on paper, October 2006-August 2007



Of 324,935 registrations, 211,483 were submitted electronically.

Source: American Angus Association.

Fig. 2: Registrations submitted electronically to the American Angus Association, by method of submission, October 2006-August 2007



Of 211,483 registrations submitted electronically, 93,819 were submitted via AIMS; 102,679 were submitted via the Internet; and 14,985 were submitted by other means.

Source: American Angus Association.

there to the Association offices, and they answer my questions,” Sitz says. “They seem to have an answer for every question. It’s a good system. It makes me wonder how everything was done before the Internet.”

Arvin Arthun, marketing manager at Sitz’s Billings, Mont., operation, says the Internet has made his job incalculably easier.

“I’m in charge of doing all our ads, and it’s an extremely helpful tool in designing and sending information,” Arthun explains. “In getting information on EPDs across, it’s very efficient. The turnaround time is short. It’s a great way to get the information out as quickly as possible. . . . It makes for an efficient operation.”

Other established Angus operations, such as Ellston, Iowa-based Hoover Angus Farm, have transitioned to Internet-based data transmission option with ease.

“We use the member logon multiple times a day, which is probably one of the things I use the Internet most often for,” says Landi McFarland, herd improvement manager with the operation. “The Association web site is by far the biggest thing. It’s extremely beneficial.”

AAA Login’s multi-layered functions are user-friendly and provide instant access to various types of records, McFarland says.

“We keep a hard copy record of all the registration papers, but I can do multiple things on the computer,” McFarland says, noting the breeding book, the weaning book, access to other data for her account, which is password-protected — another benefit.

“It definitely has made things easier, because a lot of times, at least at our place, paper records will be misplaced,” she says. “The records now are at my fingertips right away, no matter where that piece of paper might have gotten stuck.”

Hoover’s use of the Internet is limited only by a lack of access to high-speed connections, McFarland says.

“Probably the worst thing for us about the Internet is that we still have dial-up Internet, because we’re too far out in the country,” she says. “Dial-up Internet is oftentimes frustrating. It can take quite a while. If I had high-speed Internet, it would go a lot quicker.”

The AIMS and AAA Login systems combine old and new, in a sense, Bowman says, noting that documents filed electronically also are available in paper form.

There’s no reason to think the Internet age won’t continue to swallow up more of the Angus business and agriculture in general, Bowman says. “We’ve continued to see steady growth in all areas of use. Maybe it will plateau at some point, but we’re utilizing more technology every day, and it doesn’t show any signs of slowing up.”

Not that Internet access is a must, he notes. “We still provide quality service to a lot of members who don’t use electronic means. It may be a little less timely, but they still get the work in a very efficient manner.”

