



CAB Corner on Quality
(graphic file logo for
heading available on
request)

October 2008

A game of decades

By Mark McCully, CAB Supply Development Director

The society we live in has come to expect things now – fast food, 24-hour service and overnight delivery. Our patience runs thin when the changes we want don't happen quickly. So of course, Angus breeders can get frustrated as they try to raise the beef industry's quality tide. But remember, significant genetic change takes time.

Start the clock at a mating decision this spring for a calf that will be born the following spring. There goes a year, not to mention the many previous years it took to make that sire and dam. Wait another year and the calf is a yearling, ready to breed a few cows for your commercial customer. That's two years and counting.

Calves from that yearling bull are born the next spring and head off to the feedlot that fall. At the earliest, they will be ready for harvest the following spring. Best case scenario, that's four years from the time you committed to the first mating until that decision had an impact on the beef supply.

With that kind of timeline, well-reasoned breeding decisions are absolutely critical.

Of course, that yearling bull with the latest genetics is only half of the equation. The average commercial cows are 5 to 7 years old, and their sires and dams are probably the result of mating decisions from the 1980s. No wonder progress marches along at such a slow pace. Turning over generations in the U.S. cowherd takes decades.

At least one ray of hope shines through: since marbling is a highly heritable trait, selection can make significant change. The scene is not as bright for lowly heritable traits like reproduction, but our industry can improve marbling – the eating quality of our product – by using the genetic tools available.

The Angus breed has made great strides. Long known for cattle that surpass the marbling potential of other breeds, the increased emphasis on the trait in recent years has widened that competitive advantage.

But we must also remember the unit of measure for the marbling EPD (expected progeny difference), to keep the Angus progress in context. An EPD movement of a full 1.0 represents one full USDA Marbling Score, such as from Small 0 (Low Choice) to Modest 0 (Average Choice).

As breeders, we can see our average calf crop "MARB EPD" improve by 0.2 or 0.4 after several years of selection and get pretty comfortable with the idea "that's probably enough marbling." But again, remember the context, that decades-behind commercial cowherd that your bulls will improve by half. This is no time to get comfortable.

Are we making any progress? The relatively flat trend-line for percent Choice in the fed cattle mix makes us wonder. But we know that high-quality genetics are derailed every day by poorly planned weaning, health and implant programs. And even so, the Choice trend finally budged higher this year.

I'm certain we are making progress. Not long ago, a herd that achieved 30% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance would be an "amazing story." This year, CAB recognized two licensed partner feedlots that exceeded 50% CAB acceptance on more than 1,000 head, each. Those statistics were no accident, but the result of cattle designed to hit that high quality mark and fed by people who knew how to get the best out of them.

Angus breeders who continue to focus on carcass quality are to be commended. They understand long-term sustainability in this industry requires keeping the consumer top of mind in all breeding decisions. And that means keeping selection pressure on marbling.

Does it come down to sacrificing other important traits as on some kind of chase? Absolutely not. Keeping maternal function "front and center" is critical in the breeding herd. A review of the scientific literature assures us that marbling is very lowly correlated to maternal traits. In other words, there are no genetic antagonisms to keep you from including a selection for marbling.

The Angus breed must continue to discover those high-marbling cattle that are functional and excel in other economically relevant traits. We must incorporate those genetics into our breeding programs to increase

1. The supply of high-value CAB carcasses,
2. The value of Angus-sired feeder cattle and
3. The value of our Angus bulls.

END