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Success Through Genetic Selection

by Clint Berry, RAAA Communications/Member Services Director

Commercial cattlemen have always been challenged with balancing production against profitability. Successful cattlemen have made their living by reducing their cost of production and increasing the value they receive for their product. The challenges faced by cattlemen in today's beef market include the high cost of fuel, rising value of land due to demand not based on agricultural production capability, increasing cost of feed sources and the increasing difference in prices paid for variance in quality of their product. Most industry experts agree that the key to a successful cow/calf operation is for producers to reduce their cost of production. Optimistic cattlemen view these challenges as opportunities and see the value of focusing their efforts into building a cowherd that excels in low maintenance while producing the carcass traits that are demanded by the market.

Red Angus (RAAA) has developed genetic selection tools designed to give cattlemen the ability to select for the traits required to move, or perhaps maintain, their cowherd toward this capability. One of RAAA's core policies is that our success is only realized through the success of our customers, the commercial cattlemen. To accomplish this, RAAA has placed their effort into two important factors that lead the industry in commercial focus. The first is that RAAA stays focused on EPDs based on economically relevant traits that directly influence a cattlemen's bottom line. The second factor is the use of mandatory Total Herd Reporting (THR) which was approved by the RAAA member-

ship in 1997. After over a decade of use, THR has given Red Angus the most accurate EPDs in the industry by requiring every animal in a breeder's inventory to have its annual production reported to the Association. Eliminating the bias of allowing a seedstock producer to pick and choose the animals they wish to report. RAAA was the first and remains the only major breed to utilize mandatory THR, giving our breeders and our customers, the commercial cattlemen, another advantage when it comes to genetic selection.

Commercial cow/calf producers are able to utilize Red Angus EPDs to confidently select genetics that will direct their cowherd toward the production goals they have set. Cattlemen must keep in mind their market end points so that they can use the selection tools to target the areas that are most relevant to their own profitability. The investment made in genetic improvement is easier to recoup the longer a producer retains ownership of the progeny produced from the genetics purchased. For instance, cow/calf producers that sell their calves at weaning and retain their own replacement females would be most interested in selecting genetics for increased weaning weight (WW), while still balancing those with calving ease (CED). After all, it's more important to raise a live, lighter weight calf than have a cow with a dead calf that might have been heavier. But an even greater concern would be the traits expressed in the replacement females they are planning on raising and adding to their herd. The

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cost of raising replacement females vs. the cost of purchasing similar quality females is argued by many cattlemen; however, no one argues that this expense is one of the greatest production costs. Selecting genetics that improve the production lifespan of a female, lower maintenance requirements and improved fertility rates will compound the return on yearly investments. Red Angus has developed the Stayability (Stay) EPD that measures the likelihood of a bull's daughters to remain in the herd after the age of six. Producers will always gain a greater return on their genetic investment from the addition in years of production over simply additional pounds produced. The Maintenance Energy (ME) EPD was developed to allow producers to select genetics that can reduce the cost of production. It's the first EPD to look at the expense side of profitability and can drastically affect a producer's bottom line by compounding their savings annually. Heifer Pregnancy (HPG) measures the likelihood of a bull's daughters to calve by two years of age. This EPD is a measure of true fertility vs. the measure of a threshold trait such as Scrotal Measurement (SC) that is only correlated with fertility, but is used as a substitute by other breeds.

Cattlemen retaining ownership of their calves through the feedyard and selling them through a grid based marketing plan, will pay special attention to both the growth and carcass traits. They must balance growth, feed efficiency (ME), carcass weight and superior quality carcass grades to receive premiums and avoid deductions. Never forgetting that the production needs of their cowherd to produce and wean a live calf annually, while rebreeding to achieve that same goal next year, is the key to profit. Red Angus's carcass EPDs include Ribeye Area (REA), Marbling (Marb) and Back Fat (Fat). These are all utilized by other breeds; however, what sets RAAA's apart is the fact that both ultrasound data and real carcass data are incorporated into the formulation. This improves the accuracy and relevance of the EPDs to improve the selection ability of producers.

Retaining ownership of calves through the beef production cycle and/or retaining replacement females to add to a cattlemen's cowherd offers the greatest avenue for a return on investment made by selecting superior genetics. It also leaves little room for mistakes to be made because the effects of the genetics are compounded on a greater scale. Having genetic selection tools designed on the value of economically relevant traits and developed from data that is the most complete and unbiased in the industry is the advantage that cow/calf producers gain by using Red Angus in their programs. Our success is achieved through the continued success of our customers, the commercial cattlemen. ■