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The Great Debate

Craig Huffhines

Today, one of the great debates surfacing within the beef industry is based on whether or not commercial cattlemen should focus their genetic selection decisions on straightbreeding with Angus genetics or use other breeds to crossbreed in order to remain more profitable.

Much of this debate has been spawned by the American Angus Association's straightbreeding message in defense of its dominant market share position and recognition that the Hereford breed is making strides in market share penetration.

The American Hereford Association (AHA) recently launched a new ad campaign including a four-fold brochure distributed in the October *Drover's CattleNetwork* and the October *Hereford World* touting the inherent breed strengths and Hereford crossbreeding advantages to commercial cattlemen (see Page 10).

In October the American Angus Association also launched a new advertising campaign touting its respective position regarding future genetic selection recommendations for the commercial industry.

Decades of scientific research have documented the advantages of crossbreeding, and the AHA has replicated time-honored scientific results in recent years.

Studies conducted at some of the premier commercial ranches in the country have documented the advantages of crossbreeding with Hereford and, in particular, the advantage a baldie feeder steer and his replacement heifer mate carry in comparison to their straightbred Angus counterparts.

The recent studies with Lacey Land and Livestock, Harris Ranch, Circle A Ranch and Simplot Livestock Co. have reaffirmed what has already long been known and would be imprudent to dismiss during these extreme times of drought and input volatility.

My point in this article and for future conversations coming out of this office is not to disparage the Angus breed. The Angus breed is an essential component to future beef industry success and consumer satisfaction. However, the Hereford breed is poised to complement the Angus cow base in America in a way that will maintain beef quality and enhance rancher profits even further. The breeds complement one another.

Not any one breed has an exclusive on the genes that influence traits leading to profitability. Cattlemen still have to operate in environments that make it tough on straightbred black cattle. The fact that the Hereford breed is making such a resurgent comeback is testament to a response by the commercial sector to rethink its genetic selection strategy.

The American Angus Association will promote the fact that crossbreeding is focused too far on maximizing production while the industry has changed to a value-based specification beef marketing system. We can certainly agree that specification marketing is dominating modern beef production and will continue to be enhanced over time; however, the Achilles heel of single-breed genetic selection will always be centered on the most important profit driver of the industry — fertility.

Without a live, healthy calf there is no quality beef. Years of crossbreeding research have documented the advantages of crossbreeding in increasing fertility. Our own recent studies have indicated a 7% advantage in pregnancy and calving rates in baldie cows when compared to straight Angus cows. This is one issue that cannot be ignored.

Today's beef industry has taken a beating in recent years relative to drought, open cows and cow herd contraction. Hopefully, the climate will change — it always does — and the industry will trend back to normalcy with a serious economic incentive for expansion.

While producers begin to think about the type of female they will retain for their future cow factory, the issue of fertility and production efficiency will need to be addressed in conjunction with the marketability of future calf crops. While other breeds of cattle have made their product more similar to Angus, it will be the Hereford breed with its very different genetic makeup that will truly complement the Angus breed by improving fertility and calf survivability, as well as weaning weights and feed efficiency, while reducing replacement female costs.

Furthermore, the end product from that cross will exceed the expectations of consumers that have to make difficult budgetary decisions at the grocery store. **HW**