



Catalogue Shopping

Both Registered and Commercial Breeders are “Bullish” on Ultrasound Data

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So, you’re looking to buy a bull.

In the north, that means you dig out the long-Johns and Carhartt, gas up the pick-up truck, and head to the bull sale of choice. In the south, the wardrobe choices are a bit easier.

But bull selection is not easy. Finding just the right sire to meet your herd needs is a complicated process of shopping and education. Every seedstock producer publishes catalogues that highlight every animal’s potential – potential that is expressed in EPDs, actual phenotype data, and in some cases progeny predictions based on DNA.

Ultrasound has become such an integral part of gathering that information, that most producers – both Registered and Commercial – cannot imagine buying a bull without it being part of the picture.

“It’s become the industry standard,” says Kelly Schaff of Schaff Angus Valley at St. Anthony, North Dakota. Schaff sells around 500 registered Angus bulls each year, each with complete performance data and EPDs. “Our customers are used to seeing it. When it’s bull buying time they start calling and wanting to know when the numbers will be available.”

At Nichols Farms at Bridgewater, Iowa, expecting performance data to guide a bull purchase is nothing new. Ultrasound-generated data has been part of that picture since ultrasound first entered the beef industry.

“We wouldn’t be selling any bulls without it,” says Dave Nichols. At Nichols Farms, which sells Angus, Simmental, and crossbred stock, it’s the logical continuation of a long tradition. “We started keeping wean weights, yearling weights, and rate of gain data in 1957,” explains Nichols. “And now the sons and grandsons of the people who purchased those bulls still want to see performance data.”

Taking the next step from simple weight measurements to ultrasound-based EPDs wasn’t hard for customers of a seedstock producer that has always put a high premium on technological advancement. “It’s important for us to educate customers on how to use the latest technology,” says Nichols. “It’s also important for us to provide information they can use in a format they know and understand – and they know and understand the data ultrasound provides.”

As Chairman of the NCBA Product Enhancement Committee in 1994, Nichols was involved in the first efforts to validate DNA profiles. Since then, Nichols Farms has been involved in genetic research with an array of universities and genetics companies. Nichols is Chairman of the NBCEC Industry Advisory Committee. Still, he says he wouldn’t think of *not* taking ultrasound measurements and sharing the data with his customers.

“It’s common knowledge genetic markers move with each generation,” he explains. “In as little as three generations, their value is limited. So, they have to continually be retrained.”

“I was shocked when I learned that,” Nichols continues, “and was disappointed. I thought we’d be able to take one sample and know everything we needed to know about that animal; we wouldn’t have to take Birth Weights, Wean Weights, IMF and Ribeye measurements anymore. But it doesn’t work that way. Retraining the genetic markers requires ongoing collection of phenotypic data. The



only way to make true genetic progress, and increase the accuracy of all of the available technology, is to measure and record phenotypes.”

He offers the Nichols history as proof. In 1961 Nichols Farms produced the first Angus bull to weigh 1,000 lbs. In 1989, they produced Nichols Heavy Duty X100, the first Angus bull to weigh 1,600 lbs. “If that DNA had been perfect in 1961, and had never been retrained, we’d still be selling 1,000 lb. bulls,” says Nichols.

For Andy Schuepbach of Lilybrook Herefords at Claresholm, Alberta, Canada, the impact of ultrasound on the bull market is measured geographically, not chronologically. Since the BSE border restrictions have lifted, he’s seen his U.S. business grow. A trend he directly attributes to ultrasound data.

“I absolutely wouldn’t have those sales without it,” says Schuepbach. He finds Canadian producers are a little less insistent on ultrasound data, especially commercial producers. Canadian packers are not as focused on a carcass quality premium system. But with 20 percent of his bulls and some of his fed cattle going into the U.S. market, he’ll do what he needs to meet customer demand.

“They want to see that data,” he says. “It’s the only consistently reliable tool we have to increase carcass quality.” Schuepbach says within the Hereford breed the focus is on marbling. “They’ll take a little bit smaller ribeye to get the marbling.” And in his part of the country, where the prairie is flat, the wind prevailing, and the winters long, hard and cold, a bit of backfat is desirable. “Those with a little fat weather the winter better,” he adds.

Schuepbach says he almost abandoned ultrasound when the border closed due to BSE, but one regular commercial customer convinced him to stay with it, a move that is now paying off. “Purebred breeders in the states are paying attention to what we’re doing,” he says. “Our business down there keeps growing. That wouldn’t be happening if we didn’t have the data to show what we have to offer.”

Schaff and his customers agree ultrasound numbers are a verification of quality. “It confirms the visual appraisal,” says Schaff. “The ultrasound generated data quantifies the muscle that’s there.” Selling Angus, Schaff says his customers focus on ribeye size, and they want to see large numbers in the REA column of his data chart.

“The EPD is a valuable tool, and our customers want that,” he says, “but they also want to see how the animal measured at a year. They want to see the raw data.” He compares it to scrotal circumference. “There’s a scrotal EPD, but buyers still want to see the measurement.”

“It’s an indispensable merchandising tool,” adds Nichols. “Too often we look at technology and merchandising as something we use to add value to our product. But the first question should be ‘Can we sell it?’ And ultrasound-generated data is absolutely essential for selling a bull in today’s market.”