

Mid-South Atlantic Region

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From a genetic standpoint, I often wonder about the direction we are headed as an industry. Are we on a sustainable path? Are seedstock producers creating genetics that will keep commercial cattlemen profitable for generations to come? Are we making sustainable breeding decisions?

From an environmental perspective, sustainability has many components in a genetic context; however, I believe sustainable genetics must ultimately provide users with the ability to reduce their cost of production through reduced input cost. Regardless of market conditions, lower input costs will improve profit potential. To do so, breeders must emphasize fertility, feed efficiency, soundness, longevity and appropriate mature size while avoiding selection for excessive growth or carcass yield in maternal breeds.

Because feed costs account for 70% of the total cost of production in beef production systems, and about 70% of those costs are directly attributable to maintenance feed costs of the cow herd, around 50% of the total cost of production is directly related to maintenance feed costs. Simply put, next to fertility, feed efficiency is the most economically important trait in cow-calf production systems; however, feed efficiency is also one of the most underutilized traits in selection programs. If we are going to be a sustainable industry, feed efficiency must be emphasized now and in the future.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the purpose of Angus bulls is to make cows. Bulls are simply a byproduct of the system. Angus breeders need to quit making matings to create bulls and start focusing on matings to make the next generation of females more efficient cows than their mothers. The Angus cow shouldn't have to be everything to everybody in every aspect of the production chain. She can't ignore it, but she first and foremost needs to be an efficient cow.

Yet, finding a source of bulls for this purpose can be difficult as genetic services companies seem intent on selecting and promoting extremes. If we look at the top 25 sires in the breed for registrations from 2013-2015, you will find that they consistently rank in the top percentages of the breed for growth and carcass traits; however, as these values go up so does the number of their daughters that fail to make cows. In an analysis I ran last February, many of these sires had less than 27.5% of their daughters with yearling weight data wean a single calf. These sires also possessed

significantly greater weaning weight and yearling weight EPDs. How can we utilize sires when only 25% of their daughters will actually produce a calf?

The recent drop in the value of cattle has been significant, to say the least, and the length of the decline is not yet apparent. Although this is disheartening, as cow-calf producers the market forces that impact our bottom line are beyond our control, so we should view this as an opportunity to reevaluate, retool and recommit to making cows our priority.

