

Genetics play important role at Eagle Hills Ranch

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 21 May 2010 19:14 - Last Updated Friday, 21 May 2010 19:16



Shane, Todd Geiken soldon Angusfor cow-calf operation.

In the belly of a rugged canyon tucked inside the north hills, calves graze alongside their mothers.

On the canyon rim, a handful of black Angus bulls lumber around inside a pen.

Todd and Shane Geiken, operators of Eagle Hills Ranch, drive down the road that separates the bulls and other pens of cattle from grazing land.

The brothers know well the importance of genetics in producing quality beef for breeding and eating.

In fact, the Geikens and the profitability of their Angus herd at Eagle Hills Ranch were featured in the December 2009 issue of ANGUS Journal.

Todd said he and Shane carefully researched and chose black Angus in 1993 to give a jump start to a dwindling herd.

Genetics play important role at Eagle Hills Ranch

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 21 May 2010 19:14 - Last Updated Friday, 21 May 2010 19:16

While in high school, they—along with older brother Wade—helped their father Norm with that cattle operation started by their great grandfather Dick Geiken in the hills northwest of Farnam around 1915.

Succeeding generations kept the operation going.

Their parents Norm and Colleen Geiken, who own and operate Nebraska Salt & Grain along with Wade, gave Todd and Shane their blessing to expand the herd and the ranch after the brothers graduated from college.



Mick Connealy, one of Shane's college roommates, and his brother Terry Connealy—who played Husker football with Shane—and his family raise purebred Angus bulls near Whitnam.

With their expertise and the purchase of Connealy bulls, Shane and Todd began re-building the herd that today numbers about 1,600 cows and 80 bulls.

Both brothers describe the Angus breed as a leader in genetics.

Genetics they like to see in their product are certain maternal characteristics combined with potential for growth and specific carcass traits.

Genetics play important role at Eagle Hills Ranch

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 21 May 2010 19:14 - Last Updated Friday, 21 May 2010 19:16

Even though Angus calves are born smaller than some breeds—typically around 70-80 pounds—they grow quickly and often weigh about the same as larger birth-weight calves when sold in November.

Smaller calves generally mean easier delivery with less complications for heifers, Todd explained, who can then offer their babies nutrient-rich colostrum immediately after birth.

“We don’t have to stress the cow or the calf by pulling during delivery and it’s less stress on us,” Shane said. “Smaller teats on Angus also makes it’s easier for calves to nurse.”

With generally easy deliveries, Todd said the cows heal faster and are in good shape when breeding occurs in May and June.

The Geikens also like uniformity in their cattle which includes what Shane describes as “guts and butts.”

Another characteristic the Geikens like to see in their animals is a docile disposition which is also affected by the environment.

“Calm cattle means non-tainted meat,” Todd explained. “If the meat is bruised going into Tyson’s (packing plant), it can affect the meat.”

The Geikens and their ranch employees—Mike Preitauer, Robert Schwanz, Jake Fecht and Justin Geiken—start transporting cow-calf pairs to summer pasture in the hills south of town in April and May.

Justin Geiken, along with Adam Finke and Pat Soller, also begin planting 2,600 acres of farm ground that feeds the herd in the winter and is also sold as a cash crop.

Genetics play important role at Eagle Hills Ranch

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 21 May 2010 19:14 - Last Updated Friday, 21 May 2010 19:16

Breeding begins in May when bulls are put in with heifers and cows. Artificial insemination is also used in obtaining traits the brothers value in their product.

Calving begins the middle of February and continues through March and April at ranch headquarters about 10 miles north of Gothenburg or in nearby pastures the ranch owns.

Calves are weaned in October and sold as feeder cattle or kept as replacement heifers.

Record-keeping is vital to a successful cow-calf operation, the brothers said.

Not only is data about breeding—such as fertility—recorded about each animal but delivery success and seed stock information about bulls is also documented.

During branding, calves receive electronic identification ear tags that identify the animal along with dam and sire information. When calves receive vaccinations or other health-related treatments, that data and more can be entered electronically on site.

“It’s like a bar code reader and we can download that information into a computer,” Shane explained. “What used to take at least three weeks to record by hand can now be downloaded instantaneously.”

Because the ranch is an approved source of non-hormone treated (NHTC) cattle, Todd said the animals must have the tags.

In addition, ranch employees also must track what the animals eat.

NHTC designation, along with age and source approval, qualifies the calves for United States Department of Agriculture feeding programs aimed at export markets in Europe and Asia that

Genetics play important role at Eagle Hills Ranch

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 21 May 2010 19:14 - Last Updated Friday, 21 May 2010 19:16

won't buy cattle or carcasses in which hormones have been used.

Age and source approval for the Geikens means providing information about where the calves are born and their ages and a list and genetic profile of registered Angus sires.

To remain open to more export markets, the Geikens don't implant hormones after castrating calves to prevent weight loss or use the hormones that might decrease fertility.

These days, Nebraska's cattle market is on the upswing.

"Numbers are low so there's good demand," Shane said.

Plentiful corn, alfalfa, hay, pasture, access to distiller's grain and a major packing plant 30 miles away help the bottom line during good times and bad.

Add those factors to a bloodline that continues to prove itself from birth to the sale barn and the brothers are satisfied with their career choice.

At the same time, Shane said they still have room for improvement.

Mothers call to their babies as Todd turns the pickup around to drive back to ranch headquarters.

"In five more years, the business will change even more," he said. "We never want to get stagnant."

Genetics play important role at Eagle Hills Ranch

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 21 May 2010 19:14 - Last Updated Friday, 21 May 2010 19:16

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com 308-537-3636