

The size of the factory...mature cow size

Wayne Vanderwert, Ph.D.

AGA Executive Director

The most recent Meat Animal Research Center evaluation of current genetics of the major breeds provided an interesting comparison when you consider the early MARC data and where breeds have headed since the early days of continental importations. GELBVIEH is the only major breed that has kept a handle on mature cow size.

Who are the three largest in mature size? You'd guess they were all continental breeds, right? The rank may surprise you. These are the four-year old **cow weights** by sire breed.

Simmental	1353 pounds
Hereford	1348 pounds
Angus	1342 pounds
Charolais	1339 pounds
Limousin	1330 pounds
GELBVIEH	1282 pounds

Big cows don't equate to big profits.

Last fall I had the opportunity to visit a large Gelbvieh operation that is also well – respected for their Angus cattle. The breeder had evaluated the weaning performance of the calves and the cow weights by breed. The Gelbvieh cows were smaller and weaned heavier calves; in fact, the Gelbvieh cows weaned **55%** of their body weight as a bull calf, the Angus cows **47%** of their weight.

The breeder told me that in the early days of the continental breed introductions, before making a decision to breed Gelbvieh, they went to visit the Garst operation in Iowa because of their experience with so many breeds. Mary Garst told them that the growth performance of Gelbvieh and Simmental cattle was equal BUT the Gelbvieh cows were a hundred pounds smaller as mature cows.

MARC scientist, Larry Cundiff is quick to point out the relationship between birth weight and mature weight. He credits Gelbvieh breeder's prudence in reducing birth weight for a very desirable trend in mature cow size.

One of the highlights of the recent Gelbvieh convention and National Western Stock Show was having Lee Leachman as a luncheon speaker. Lee's topic was mature cow size.

Lee Leachman is on the mature cow size warpath! And he appreciates the Gelbvieh contribution in his composite program for just that reason.

Lee provided an economic comparison of 1150-lb. and 1400-lb. cows. The same feed resources that would feed 100 of the big cows could support 116 of the smaller cows. His assumption that the smaller cows would have a slightly better reproductive rate is based on experience and research. He also credits the larger cows with the ability to wean heavier calves, though at a lower percentage of body weight. The 116 smaller cows wean more total pounds, which, because they're lighter, command a higher price per pound. Lee gives those calves a \$5.00/cwt advantage at market. Admittedly you have to assume more income from cull cows, Lee's example accounts for that and still provides over a \$75 per cow higher return for the more moderate cow herd, an advantage of \$8,121 for the 116 cows over the 100 larger counterparts.

Lee also warned the audience of the temptation to continue down the path of selecting for higher and higher yearling weight EPDs. He quickly points out that they stopped selecting for yearling weight in 1997 in an attempt to keep mature size under control. One of his points was that the younger end of the mature cows in your herd were sired by bulls born in 1998 or before.

Drawing from his experience with Angus cattle, Lee points out that the average yearling weight EPD then was 55 pounds. Today he wants a moderate yearling weight EPD, below average frame size and mature weight.

"An Angus breeder chasing the 90 and 100 plus yearling EPDS means 1500 plus pound cows", he told the group.

Additionally he pointed out that a lot of the Angus breed's current problems in marbling and CAB acceptance stem from those high growth cattle not reaching a compositional end point. There is an important 'balanced selection' message for cattlemen to digest in his remarks.

There are biological limitations. Remember that carcass weights are very closely associated with mature cow weights and a strong economic incentive to produce carcass weights in the acceptable window is present. This past year's carcass test data indicates that Gelbvieh provide carcass weights and ribeyes that are right on the industry target. Using the SmartCross® approach will provide the carcass quality to increase value and leave you with a cowherd that can reduce costs and maximize returns.

The more I learn about cattle breeding, the more I realize that a lot of good things like reproduction, growth, carcass merit and PROFITABILITY sure seem to huddle in the middle of the road. My advice, stay out of the ditches!