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Lowdown On Lowlines

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A western Nebraska ranch boosted annual profit by 17% by using half-blood Lowline cows to produce more pounds of beef/acre.



It was their search for the best way to merchandise the grass covering the rolling hills of their Cody, NE, ranch that led Jerry Adamson and his son Todd to Australia several years ago. That's where they discovered what the Adamsons say are the purest Angus bloodlines in the world — Lowlines.

“We needed 1,150-lb. cows that consumed less grass than a 1,400-lb. but produced nearly as heavy a calf,” Jerry says. “We found what was probably the largest full-blood Lowline bull in Australia and brought home 750 units of semen. Using a half-blood Lowline cow and a modern-day crossbred bull, we're weaning calves nearly the same size as the larger cows produced. We've tried to be conservative in our estimates of increased profits with these genetics, but we have seen producers who have achieved a 20% increase in profits with this plan.”

Todd headed up the research that outlines the Adamsons' production inputs and profits scenario. He says they based their projections on the fact that the average cow consumes 2.2% of her body weight in dry matter every day.

“Most university figures agree with that number,” Todd says. “We know producers raising all breeds of cattle have been retaining their biggest heifers for replacement females over the last 40-50 years. That means cows and bulls have gotten bigger and bigger, but efficiency has been left behind. Figures that told us how many pounds of beef for every acre of grass come from bigger cows revealed that smaller cows actually produce more beef per acre, increasing profits at a minimum of 16.7%.”

To implement their plan to reduce their herd's cow size, the Adamsons used Lowline bulls on their first-calf heifers. Doing so, they eased the calving process for the heifers and retained heifer calves from the cross to begin developing a herd of 1,150-lb. cows.

“The beef industry has been using weaning weight as a measuring stick for efficiency,” Jerry says. “A better efficiency measure is the return on grass per acre. In our scenario, we based figures on calves that were 30 lbs. lighter than the calves out of 1,400-lb. cows.

“But calves out of our half-blood Lowline cows are nearly as heavy as those from the larger cows. We didn't develop this program with the idea of producing grass-fed beef, but it certainly works for a producer who wants to get involved in that kind of program,” he adds.

The Adamsons were confident they'd be satisfied with Lowline genetics because they are Angus cattle. While they downsized their cows, the Adamsons have retained desirable Angus traits that include good milking, easy fleshing and docile nature.

“Lowlines aren't a new breed,” Jerry says. “In the late 1930s, the Australian government brought a herd of registered, line-bred Angus cattle from Canada to the Trangie Agricultural Research Center. The herd was divided in half and the only selection criterion in both herds for the next 58 years was frame size.”

One of the herds was bred to determine how large a frame could be achieved through the breeding program. The other herd was bred to attain the smallest frame size. The former were called Highlines, and the latter referred to as Lowlines.

“In 1998, the research project was ended and the government planned to terminate the cattle,” Adamson says. “When the public discovered the plan, there was an outcry for the Lowlines because the public perceived them as very appealing. As a result, the Australian government put the Lowlines up for sale, and some of the cattle were imported to America.”

At their Rocking J Ranch, the Adamsons have retained nearly 300 half-blood Lowline cows and 20 full-blood Lowline cows in their herd. Within their three calving units, the Adamsons produce approximately 2,450 calves/year. Of those, 300 have Lowline influence and the remaining 2,150 have Chiangus, Maine Anjou and Simmental influence.

In the last five years, Rocking J Ranch and its partner George Jenkins of North Platte, NE, have shown their Lowline cattle nationwide, winning championships at every major Lowline show. Their full-blood Lowline bull, nicknamed The Brick, has been crowned Grand Champion or Reserved Grand Champion at every major Lowline show in the U.S.

“The Lowline show, with 254 head in competition, was the second-largest breed show at Denver in 2008,” Jerry says. “Lowlines are beginning to show up at cattle shows across the country and a lot of Midwest fairs. At the 2007 Denver Fed Beef Contest, held in conjunction with the National Western Stock Show, our pen of half-blood Lowline steers raised at the Rocking J Ranch placed second to the Grand Champion Entry.”

Meat produced from Lowline-influenced cattle falls into the fine-textured category and is very tender, Adamson says. He adds that the combination of increased profitability of Lowline genetics and high quality of Lowline beef gives producers two highly desirable traits for current beef markets.

“The meat is extremely palatable,” Adamson says. “Everyone comments on its tenderness.”

The Adamsons offer percentage and full-blood Lowline bulls, retaining the majority of their heifers. They expect demand to grow as producers realize the benefits of smaller-framed cows. Jerry notes that producers interested in downsizing cows need to factor in their bull's maternal bloodlines in order to be successful.

“Perception is a big driver in decisions about genetics,” Jerry says, “but the facts about the total pounds of beef produced from an acre of grass are the best measure of profitability.”

Loretta Sorensen is a freelance writer based in Yankton, SD.

[See Figure 1](#)

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