

Case Study:

Through careful selection and management, John Fry and his family have generated an efficient production system targeting young, high yielding, grain finished beef.

Based at Donnybrook, WA, in the Capel River valley, the Fry family has historically run 1100 Angus cows on approximately 1100 hectares but has recently reduced the scale of operation and turn off. This planned reduction has focused on increasing equity from 75% to 98% due to a downturn in WA beef prices from 2002-2010 and approaching retirement.

The Fry's innovative breeding and finishing operation have focussed on selection for increased meat yield which is an economically important trait.

Traditionally Mr Fry has bred Belgian Blue x Angus bulls for mating with cows while sourcing yearling Angus bulls for mating with heifers. The breeding program for the Belgian Blue x Angus composites focused on selecting 10 heavy muscled homebred bull calves, ranging from B+ to A+ muscle score at marking. The selected heavy muscled bull calves were then culled for growth, temperament and structure typically leaving 5 bulls available for first use at 15 months old. Yearling bulls are joined to 20 cows (5%) and 33 cows (3%) in subsequent years.

Each year, between 600-1100 animals at 10-13 months old are grain finished, using home grown grain and hay.

Mr Fry has target carcass weights of 230-300kg. During the 90 day finishing period average consumption is 730kg grain and 320kg hay. In addition to breeding his own progeny to finish, he leases Belgian Blue x Angus composite bulls to other producers.

"We buy back the progeny as weaners to supplement our feedlot," Mr Fry said.

This arrangement allows him to capture rewards from his system.

"We can supply genotypically similar yearlings to the high value grain-fed yearling grid autumn/winter market that appreciate high yielding MSA graded bodies," he said.

Last season, the finished yearling cattle dressed at an average of 56.6% with a range from 50.5% to 66.6%. By keeping weaner cattle on a fast

growth path, the Fry's business captures the meat quality and production efficiency benefits associated with younger age at slaughter.

Mr Fry has not been afraid to push the boundaries and experiment with selection emphasis for yield. This has previously included extensive use of embryo transfer of purebred Belgian Blue into Angus cows that were delivered through caesarean section.

"We accepted the market was not ready to reward yield," Mr Fry said.

This sparked a decision to adapt the breeding program and mate all stud cows to Angus bulls with strict culling for any calving problems, resulting in calving assistance under 0.5% (1 in 200).

"By adopting commercial selection we are now able to use top Angus genetics for growth without calving problems," he said.

"As a result we no longer run any purebreds (Belgian Blue) but have a percentage of females that carry myostatin genes (high muscling) recessively but phenotypically look like Angus."

These cows are mated to the Belgian Blue x Angus composites to provide the heavy muscled bull replacements used in the herd today.

Mr Fry's EBV selection criteria for Angus bulls focus on having high carcass weight but moderate mature cow weight. This approach aims to capture the increased end-product value associated with carcass weight whilst maintaining a moderate mature cow weight.

"Our current Angus bulls average +59kg for Carcass Weight EBV where the Angus average is +48kg," he said. "We now source bulls in the top 10-15% for Carcass Weight EBV that still have an average Mature Cow Weight EBV (+80kg)."

Temperament is also an important aspect of the Fry's bull selection. Having had experience of bulls with very high overall genetic merit based on EBVs but poor temperament Mr Fry hopes to select for improved temperament along with other economically important traits.

"We have asked the Angus Society to include temperament selection to identify sires with poor temperament," he said. "The Limousin Society adopted it years ago and have achieved great results."

The Frys are great believers in benchmarking, which they use to examine production costs and to



John Fry & family

Location: Donnybrook, Capel River valley, Western Australia

Property Size: 600 Ha grazing land with 75 Ha flood irrigated

Average annual rainfall: 950mm

Growing season: typically 5.5 months from mid May to end of October

Primary target market: high yielding Belgian Blue infused Angus steers and heifers finished with grain in on-property feedlot for 90 days

Primary calving month(s): April / May with heifers mated for 6 weeks and cows 8-9 weeks

learn from peers what systems bring better returns on resources.

"We submit data to Red Sky which has had great results in the dairy industry in Australia and New Zealand, and has already spread to beef in Tasmania," Mr Fry said.

Mr Fry has long contributed to beef industry research and development, both in WA and at a national level. He is a member of the WA Beef Council and Chair of the Producer Round Table.

He has also served as a member of Beef CRC II advisory committee and maintains a keen interest in the Beef CRC Maternal Productivity Project.

Mr Fry is a regular at the Vasse Field Day and earlier this year following the Association for the Advancement of Animal Breeding and Genetics (AAABG) conference held in Perth, Mr Fry hosted visiting scientists at his property.

Overall, Mr Fry relishes the opportunity to interact with likeminded beef producers.