

Dairy/Livestock

Producers say Aubracs are golden opportunity

By ERIC GRANT

WHEN Wayne and Jean Bollum set out to produce seedstock more than a decade ago, their goals were simple: They wanted trouble-free, efficient cattle that exceeded customer expectations for production merit and carcass quality.

"We felt like it was critical that we approached this from a financial standpoint," says Wayne, who's spent 20 years in ag publishing. Jean is a financial manager and a CPA.

"We realized that seedstock production is not a terribly lucrative business, so we set out to build efficiencies into our cow herd, and to add value to the cattle we produced," says Wayne.

The Bollums, whose farm is located just west of Northfield, also realized that they had to find a way of differentiating themselves in the marketplace. So in 1995, Wayne got wind of a breed of cattle called Aubracs (pronounced Oh-braks), and traveled to Europe to see them firsthand.

Aubracs were developed in the mountainous region of south-central France. They are moderate-framed, deep-gutted and heavily muscled. They possess strong feet and legs, and are known across Europe as rugged, efficient foragers.

"We found that the native French Aubrac cattle have an inborn hardiness that translates to problem-free cows and efficient pasture utilization. This is an especially important trait for cattle producers like us, who have other business interests or careers, so their cow herd is a part-time endeavor. These cattle just don't need a lot of attention. They take care of themselves," says Wayne.

Good foragers

Aubracs were also appealing because of their ability to produce well-conditioned and heavily muscled cattle on limited forage.

"This breed thrives on grass," says Wayne. "Hardly any grain is fed to Aubracs in France. In fact, the national bull test in France feeds a totally forage-based ration throughout the feeding period. This grass-efficiency trait is becoming more important in the U.S. as corn prices increase and demand for grass-fed beef grows exponentially."

The Bollums began an artificial insemination program using French sires — particularly Goeland, Impresario and Jacquot — on their cow herd in the spring of 1996 with an aggressive estrous synchronization program. They found the breed especially suited for their Angus-cross cows, adding more muscle and fleshing ability while improving calving ease and fertility.

"An Aubrac element in our cow herd and an Angus

Key Points

- Part-time beef farmers like the Aubrac breed.
- These cattle thrive on forage-based rations.
- Aubracs cross well with Angus cattle to produce lean beef.

element in the sire line makes a wonderful cross," says Wayne. "You end up with enough bred-in cow efficiency with lean-muscle development, plus you get the meat quality and market acceptance of Angus genetics."

In 2001, the operation purchased its first full-blood Aubrac bull — BC Double O Six. The sire, nicknamed "Bruce" in honor of Bruce Boyd, one of the breed's pioneers, has produced five outstanding calf crops for the Bollums. His calves have been some of the most sought-after Aubrac cattle in North America.

Quality matters

The Bollums are committed to raising Aubrac cattle that meet specific quality thresholds. Mature cows should weigh 1,300 pounds and maintain an optimum body condition score of 5 to 6. The cattle are also selected for good temperaments, and the family has placed a great deal of emphasis on breeding polled cattle.

They also hope to get all their cows in the herd up to a standard of 75% or greater Aubrac breeding, while continuing to focus on quality characteristics, fertility, docility and growth.

"Longer term, the goal is to supply Aubrac bulls and semen to other breeders, contributing to a majority of the North American herds," says Wayne.

A key component to the Bollums' business plan is their Golden Oaks freezer-beef program. Selling beef directly to local consumers has added significant value to their operation and helped insulate them against price fluctuations in the commodity calf markets.

"This also keeps our live-cattle decisions based on the reality of consumer



GOOD MOTHERS: The Bollums like the Aubrac breed because cows calve easily and are good mothers.

demands," says Wayne. "We frequently hear about the lean, tender characteristics of the Aubrac beef. Our beef customers keep us grounded. This helps us place a high priority on eating quality, texture and leanness. Our fed steers will be harvested with carcass weights of 800 pounds with 15-inch ribeyes, 0.3 inches of backfat grading low choice with a yield grade of 2."

The reputation of their cattle extends beyond local beef customers. In recent years, the Bollums have enjoyed considerable success marketing Aubrac seedstock across the United States. Last spring, two Golden Oaks bulls brought the highest prices ever paid for Aubracs in North America. The bulls sold to a century-old ranching operation in western Colorado. The Bollums have also sold bulls and females to customers with leading herds in Alberta, Montana and Colorado.

"Aubrac cattle are well-positioned to help the U.S. beef industry deliver grass-fed or pasture-focused beef to the marketplace," says Wayne. "There has been substantial growth in the organic, natural and grass-fed beef business the last several years, and producers involved in these ventures are beginning to recognize the merits of Aubracs for those kinds of production systems. Unlike most breeds of cattle, Aubracs are developed for forage-based beef. Their genetics don't have to be retrofitted to work in these kinds of systems."

Working on genetics

In the future, the Bollums plan to continue their business approach to breeding cattle and producing beef. Their goal is to increase the Aubrac influence in their cow herd and to continue to develop a nationwide customer base for their genetics.

"Our success is defined by the success of our customers," says Wayne. "One of the best conversations we can have is to hear about a Montana rancher who says that his Golden Oaks Beef herdsire is his 'favorite bull.' This makes his operation a good candidate for more Northfield cattle. Plus, when freezer-beef customers stop us downtown and ask when can they buy another quarter, that says that they have had a good experience with our product. That's why we're in this business and that's what matters the most."

Grant is a writer from Colorado.



CHILDREN INVOLVED: Son Will helps dad Wayne feed their Aubrac cattle. Daughter Haley helps with computer records and both show cattle in 4-H.

SAME GREAT PRODUCT, NEW LOW PRICE.



EZ-GUIDE® Plus
GPS lightbar guidance using free WAAS signal.
\$1,995

OPTIONS



EZ-STEER® with T2™
Assisted steering with terrain compensation.
\$3,495



EZ-BOOM™ 2010
GPS automatic boom section control.
\$1,895

Contact your local Trimble, Case IH, New Holland, Ag Leader or Hardi dealer for more information.

www.ez-guide.com

Trimble

Trimble Agriculture. The line everyone follows.

©2007, Trimble Navigation Limited. All rights reserved. Trimble, the Globe & Triangle logo, EZ-Guide and EZ-Steer are trademarks of Trimble Navigation Limited, registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office and in other countries. EZ-Boom and T2 are trademarks of Trimble Navigation Limited. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.