Getting serious about docility

Most would agree on the importance of having quiet cattle – for safety and for the associated meat quality benefits (see page 14). While culling the odd wild one helps to some extent, it is not nearly as effective as actively selecting for docility using BREEDPLAN EBVs. The Withers family are using this selection technique very effectively with their “Donna Valley” Limousin stud. I recently judged some of their excellent cattle in a Performance class, and afterwards discussed this with them.

Based near Holbrook in southern NSW, Greg and Mary, with Stud Manager Karen Hedger have 150 stud cows on BREEDPLAN. They also lease 50 cows, and with some ET, calve down 240 recorded cows and sell 60 or so bulls a year.

“We have been scoring all our calves for docility and sending the data to BREEDPLAN for 5 years”, Greg told me. “We are very pleased with progress, as seen in our 2002 sale bulls with av. Docility EBVs of +6.5 compared to Breed Av of +3. We expect to make even faster progress with the new version of BREEDPLAN which gives us EBVs on cows and young cattle (previously only Sires).”

Mary told me how important it is to do the scoring on untrained weaners. “If you wait until cattle have been weaned and scored on untrained weaners. “If you wait until cattle have been weaned and handled, you’re just fooling yourself. The temperament differences will be reduced, and come out in later generations. We bring one calf in at a time into a yard to score, and fine tune our scores with crush observations. It does not matter if different breeders score a little higher or lower – as long as they are consistent and do a whole mob. Like all things in BREEDPLAN, it is how individual animals compare to the average of a like treated group of cattle, which is important.”

The following five standard Limousin scores are used:

1. Docile
2. Restless
3. Nervous
4. Flighty
5. Aggressive

These scores each have detailed descriptions (eg: 1. Docile - “Mild disposition, gentle and easily handled, stands and moves slowly during handling, undisturbed, settled, somewhat dull, does not pull on headgate when in crush, exits crush calmly”).

“We find them very easy to apply repeatably, and would actually prefer them to be subdivided into part scores”, concluded Mary.

Recently “Donna Valley” leased a group of 50 Limousin stud cows. “Some of their calves were a little too alert. These turned out to be all by one sire. On looking up his EBV, we found it was very negative, further proof to us, of how well this works” added Karen.

Greg is currently President of the Limousin Society and is pleased to see many other members now docility scoring their calves. “As a breed, we have addressed a problem identified by commercial breeders, and have made genetic progress These EBVs are something tangible to work with. Most members are very supportive. Some start out collecting scores to disprove the system, and they generally quickly see that it works. Much better than some of our old ‘fables’ that high milk or scrotal size will be correlated with quietness. I know some other breeds are closely watching what we have done.”

### World Whiteface linkage project

A project has recently commenced to allow better comparison of North American EPDs (Estimated Progeny Differences) with Australasian EBVs. For Hereford /Poll Hereford.

To generate the required data, link progeny are being bred in Australia, Canada and the US, with Sires nominated by each country. Four Aust Sires (2 horned, 2 polled) are being used, along with four North American Sires.

In Australia, the first round of inseminations was done late in 2001. The aim is to have steers and data ready for the 2004 World Hereford Conference here, and to facilitate discussion on a possible World Hereford evaluation.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mt Difficult Unsworth</th>
<th>Av for Mt Difficult</th>
<th>Pen 3 - Hamilton 2002*</th>
<th>Av for Sydney Show winners 1990 - 2001</th>
<th>Breed Av. 2000 born+</th>
<th>Highest 10%</th>
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<td>Birth Wt</td>
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<td>600 day Wt</td>
<td>+ 70</td>
<td>+ 69</td>
<td>+ 62</td>
<td>+ 46</td>
<td>+ 63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eye muscle</td>
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<td>+ 1.8</td>
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<td>+ 0.2</td>
<td>+ 1.1</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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* Supermarket class
+ Same base as Hereford table C)