



PHOTOS COURTESY NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASS'N

A 'Voogt' for Profitability

New NCBA president concentrates on crucial issue.

by Barb Baylor Anderson

Business success relies on profitability. Arguably at no other time has that topic been so crucial to the U.S. beef industry. Worldwide demand is down, production costs are up and producers are stuck in the middle. As president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), Michigan Angus breeder Gary Voogt is making it his mission to find the best ways to address the profitability crisis at home and within the industry.

"The beef business is all about profitability. Everything else pales in comparison to that," he confirms. "The beef business needs old-fashioned profits to be sustainable. Today's tough economy, high import costs and this new administration in Washington, D.C., are making things challenging."

Gary was not born into farming, but today operates Voogt Farms near Grand Rapids with his wife, Shirley, and several family members. The farm originated in 1967 as a Polled Hereford operation. Sensing an industry trend toward black cattle, Gary and Shirley switched to Angus about 20 years ago. Today, they have 100 purebred cows and raise hay and use pasture to feed them. Also involved in the operation of the farm are

daughter Michele, a veterinary technician; son Zachary; and daughter Kelly.

Focus on farm profitability

"Our philosophy is that if you are in the purebred business, you must match your product to your customer," Gary says. "We focus our beef production on tenderness and marbling and a correct-size ribeye."

Gary strives for average-size, efficient cows that produce heavy calves.

"Through commonsense selection of balanced traits and easy-birth-weight AI (artificial insemination) sires, we have virtually eliminated calving problems," he says. "I do the AI work with assistance from Zach. We [use] time breeding so we can start calving by New Year's Day to have yearling bulls ready at grass turnout time and for yearling heifers to be ready to breed ahead of the cows."

Matching cattle to the Michigan environment is also important. The Voogts feed hay 180 days per year, and raise Boer goats to eat the weeds and brush from the pasture. All hay for winter feeding is produced on the farm.

Their grazing program is an intensive,

rotational system with 16 paddocks that each has water available. Cattle are divided into two groups, each with about 40 cow-calf pairs and a bull. By the end of each June, cows stay in each paddock about eight days. Gary records the amount of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium the cows deposit as manure in each paddock. Their data show the cows utilize more forage, and the manure is evenly distributed over the paddocks.

"Our farmstead is surrounded by housing development, so we have to do what we can to be environmentally correct, control runoff and treat our neighbors well," he says. "In 2002, we added a waste handling and retention basin/filter strip system as well."

Voogt Farms is verified by the Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP). The family also participates in and is certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Comprehensive Manure Management Program. In addition, the farm is tuberculosis (TB)-free and negative for Johne's disease. Five family members are certified Five State Quality Beef Producers.

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►**Above:** NCBA President Gary Voogt (left) was not born into farming, but today operates Voogt Farms near Grand Rapids with his wife, Shirley (right), and several family members. "The beef business needs old-fashioned profits to be sustainable," he says.

take over and make a living. No one on our farm will probably be a full-time producer. Many Angus breeders rely on outside jobs for income. But we need to do what is necessary to keep our operation profitable and provide a way for it to continue on," Gary says.

An eye on industry profitability

Gary carries that philosophy into his work as NCBA president, where he says the focus is on working with the beef checkoff to increase beef demand at higher price levels that can lead to improved profits. NCBA has a number of programs that involve trade promotion, consumer advertising and more. NCBA simultaneously works on the policy side of the beef industry on those issues that can also enhance beef producer profitability.

"We need to maintain profitability from the retailer to the packer to the feedlot to the calf producer," he says. "In this economy, beef demand is lower. The Choice-to-Select spread is too close. People are moving from higher-priced steaks to hamburger and from hamburger to chicken. It is breathtaking how much equity feedlots lost last year. That affects their ability to pay good prices for calves, which affects cow-calf profitability. Some bull buyers now are looking for cow fresheners rather than herd improvers, a big mistake."

Gary says he is equally concerned about the negative impact that animal rights activists and radical environmentalists could have on beef industry profitability.

"They want cattle off the land and beef off the plate," he says. "NCBA is mounting issues management campaigns, meeting with Congress and regulatory folks, to make sure the U.S. remains food independent. We can't get ourselves into a position where we rely on foreign countries for food the way we do for oil. Food production in the U.S. must remain a matter of national security."

He encourages other Angus producers to get involved on these and other issues by joining local or county beef organizations, taking on leadership roles with state beef councils and becoming an NCBA member. He says his participation has been gratifying.

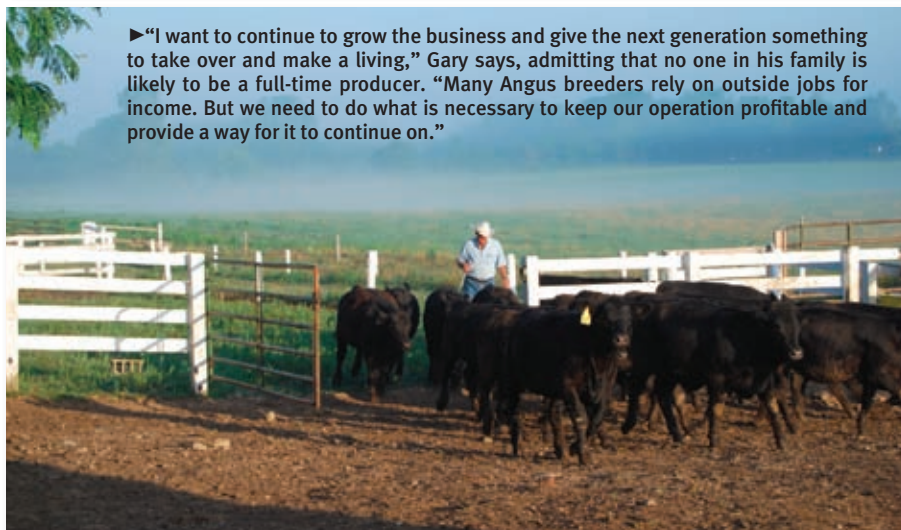
And while he says that serving as NCBA president is nearly a full-time job, he is pleased to be able to give back to an industry that has offered him so much.

"The Angus business has been very satisfying for me. I feel it is my duty to serve the industry," he says. "I will be gone more than 200 days this year, and my family is doing a great job at home. I like to be out meeting with producers, talking through the issues. I challenge other Angus breeders to offer their feedback, and get involved with helping the industry return to a healthy level of profitability."



► **Left:** Sensing an industry trend toward black cattle, Gary and Shirley switched to Angus about 20 years ago.

► **Below:** The Voogts' grazing program is an intensive, rotational system with 16 paddocks that each has water available.



► "I want to continue to grow the business and give the next generation something to take over and make a living," Gary says, admitting that no one in his family is likely to be a full-time producer. "Many Angus breeders rely on outside jobs for income. But we need to do what is necessary to keep our operation profitable and provide a way for it to continue on."



► **Left:** "We can't get ourselves into a position where we rely on foreign countries for food the way we do for oil," Gary says. "Food production in the U.S. must remain a matter of national security."