Phepson Angus Newsletter 003

Grass fed – no fuss – maximising meat from forage

Welcome to the latest edition of the Phepson Angus newsletter…Hardly a week goes by without news of financial system or supply chain instability. It seems the Chinese proverb/curse, “May you live in interesting times” has come true for us all in the early 21st Century. Planning ahead is pretty tricky at present. Inflation may mean that meat prices rise in the future so should we chase more production to take advantage of the increased prices? I’ve heard some say so. The trouble is that input prices seem to be rising faster than sale prices, so while you might get more for your cattle the margins can actually be getting tighter. This takes time to play through with many of the costs of production in a fat animal spent over 18 months BEFORE you sell it. Initially these prices can look really good but make sure you are planning for the time when the inputs have increased as much as your sale price and see the impact on your cash-flow and long term profitability. What happens if prices fall after spending more on inputs? For us at Phepson Angus it seems more important than ever to run an operation with the lowest possible input costs. We hardly have any inputs so when input costs rise we don’t see a big increase in business costs. However, we still benefit from sale price inflation and in fact see our margins increase as prices rise. **Low risk, higher reward**.

At Phepson, we breed cattle that work for you

Can you have a cow that can do Everything?!

If you believe some of the marketing out there you might think so! It seems some cows can be terminal and maternal all at the same time. They will grow fast and still have sound joints, they will have more muscle growth and fatten more easily, they'll have more marbling with no impact on hormone expression, they will have more milk and yet be easier keeping and they'll probably do your tax return for you if you ask them nicely…

You can't fit a Quart into a Pint pot!

The reality is that the best results in feed efficiency trials have shown an improvement no greater than 20% and the rate of improvement diminishes over time. There is only so much energy available and no matter how clever we think we are and how cleverly we display our imagined performance data none of this can re-write the laws of Thermodynamics -

1st Law - Energy can be transformed from one form to another but can neither be created or destroyed

2nd Law - Entropy is real! - Entropy (the reduction in energy available/effectively converted into work over time) can increase but it cannot decrease

Now these laws of Physics apply to closed systems and a beef production is not a closed system so if you want to bring in some more energy to a system you can…**at a cost**. We can measure these increases in energy input through the animals that live within the systems. We can see growth rates ever increasing, weaning weights going up, milk production increasing, conception rates higher, more marbling and easier fattening - but if we know that energy isn't free and that the price of energy

in all forms is increasing then we have to be really careful about where we want the energy requirements of our cattle to be.

What is “Performance”?

“Performance” recording seems to be the buzz word of the moment but what exactly are we recording and what do we mean by “Performance”? We recently had a visit from a pedigree cattle breeder from Argentina. He runs about 2000 pedigree cows and is working as part of a breeding group that has members with over 5,000 head. These are serious operations and serious businesses. In discussions with him about what genetics he was looking for he was very specific. He was looking for cattle that could thrive on the grass they had. Not improved grass, but the grass they had. One of the key measurements they use, and they are serious about their records, is $Energy or basically maintenance requirements. They need a cow that isn’t stressed by its environment while producing a marketable calf every year. Pretty simple. Here’s the problem…if we add more growth rate - that needs more energy, if we add more marbling - that needs more energy, if we add more milk - that needs more energy.

You can see where I'm going here. We can't magic extra energy out of thin air and I think we have to be careful, that in the pursuit of progress, we don't create a cow that's going to cost us more to keep. Margins are tight enough without accidentally making things worse.

Performance within what the environment can sustainably produce

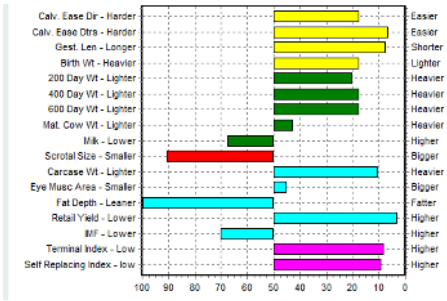
The above is how we measure performance and so if a cow is producing a marketable calf every year problem free then, for us at least, she is doing her job. We don't really need her to do more than that but we do make her work for it. Many unseen crutches support the performance recorded animals some of which simply don't manage without these costly supports.

Cows that work for us not the other way around

All of our cows are wintered outside and always have been. Many of our cows have never been in a shed. No dry bedding and high quality conserved forage when they are in driving rain on cold wet winter days that turn into weeks. Probably the biggest challenge we place on our cows is carrying their calves through the winter.

We wean at 10 months in March (hopefully onto growing grass!). The cows get 60 days off before they are back calving again, just like a dairy cow. Weaning at 6 months and having 6 months off seems to be a pretty big crutch when you think about it. How much extra energy is needed to feed those calves high protein silage or a post weaning ration - never mind the labour, building and machinery cost. These costs are NOT going down. We don't worm our cattle routinely and they only get native grasses. No high sugar varieties that need re-seeding every few years. Inevitably this means smaller cows to cope with this environment but it does mean we keep our direct costs as low as possible.

Can we trust the numbers?



I was talking to a customer the other day who is also 100% forage based and he had been to see a feed efficiency test in situ. He couldn't believe the amount of inputs that were being thrown at these cattle.
Yes some cattle were more "efficient" than others at converting feed but he couldn't see how any results from the trial could be relevant to him because the system was so far removed from his own. However, at the end of the trial there would be "proof" that they knew which animals were more efficient. If we can't create energy out of thin air and if we operate in a system with limited inputs then what other traits is this increase in growth rate at the expense of? I've heard proponents of this say that these improvements are "free". They may appear to be in a trial with almost unlimited inputs but I guarantee they are at the expense of something else in a closed system - unless of course they've managed to circumvent our understanding of the conservation of energy…

Personally, I think the numbers are right but the system is wrong. The numbers are accurate in the right system and if you can afford to feed cattle plenty of grain then these are probably the animals for you, even if it would be more "efficient" to put the grain through a monogastric animal like a pig or a chicken to produce protein.

Low risk, Higher reward

Many of us in the grassfed sector accept that we want to produce within the bounds of what the environment can produce sustainably. With a relatively fixed supply of energy input we need an animal whose energy requirements fall within what the environment can produce. This keeps costs and risks down and means that higher prices, however you achieve them, increase your margins.

Our Cows

- Fertile
- Maternal
- Long lived
- Large rumen capacity – excellent forage converters
- Perfect udders
- Strong feet and legs
- Good temperament
- PROFITABLE

Link to our cows

Our Bulls

- Fertile
- Long lived
- Moderate frame size of high quality
- Excellent forage converters
- PROFITABLE

Link to our bulls

“After visiting Rob and seeing how he manages his grass and testing his genetics, I was very keen to purchase some of his cattle. I didn’t need to see them, I just put an order in of what I wanted, and Rob did the rest. It’s very reassuring when you find a breeder who really knows his cattle and can be trusted to send you exactly what you want. We will be purchasing more in the future.”

Geraint Powell

Nuffield Scholar

“We bought a bull from Phepson Angus as we wanted to shift our maternal line to a smaller more efficient cow, high fertility and easy calving. The bull we bought has delivered on everything we wanted. We will certainly be a repeat customer.”

Silas Hedley-Lawrence
FAI Farms

We bought 2 bulls from Rob because we wanted easy calving, fertile, hardy bulls. Very happy with initial results on 62 heifers with 100% in calf, 73% bred in the 1st cycle. Bulls didn't go lame or lose condition while working

Oliver Chedgey
2022 Organic Dairy Farmer of the Year

We have PHEPSON ANGUS bulls available from February 2023

Please get in touch if you would like more information about available bulls. We have sold out for the last 3 years so please get in early to secure your breeding bull.

Free Consultancy

We often get requests for consultancy on both grassland and cattle management in holistic management systems. While we do take on some advisory work in limited situations we do tend to try and sign-post to other advisers in the regenerative agriculture sector. However, **ALL PHEPSON ANGUS CUSTOMERS** receive a **FREE** consultation with their purchase and for our customers we are always available on the phone. So if you are interested in saving money through your grazing systems and would like to add some proven fertility genetics to your herd then get in touch.

Kaiser, Senior Herd Sire

Semen straws available for UK and International export.

Your opportunity to buy into our programme

- Excellent producer of easy calving, fertile, moderate females for grass production
- Will reduce frame size while still maintaining commercial scale.
- Extremely fertile Bull - producing over 1000 straws per jump on collection on several occasions (bulls usually produce 150 - 350 straw per jump)
- Line bred 4 times to Champion Bull "Evesund of Dupplin" who was known as the "Great Fixer of Udders"
- We find Kaiser will correct poor udder structure in the 1st cross/generation
- Huge rumen capacity - weighs 1000kg in working clothes - 53 inches at the hip
- Kaiser is the foundation of our maternal bull lines, and is now available to you

Semen straws and genetics available for UK and International export.

Contact Rob or Sarah for an order form.

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