SIMMENTAL SURGE IN **DEMAND IMMINENT**

After just over 50 years in New Zealand, Simmental breeders are poised for another surge in demand for sires that produce faster finishing cattle and heavier carcass weights than traditional breeds.

WORDS **TONY LEGGETT**

Simmental cattle quickly earned a reputation for rapid growth rates soon after arriving here in a wave of exotic breed imports, helping to cement its place as the third largest breed in the country behind the Angus and Hereford breeds.

Simmental NZ Councillors Tom Sanson (Gold Creek Simmental) and Daniel Absolom (Rissington Cattle) believe the breed is in a prime position to capitalise on its proven ability to sire fast-growing cattle at heavier carcass weights before the second winter. They are buoyed by the results coming in the past eight years from the Informing NZ Beef Progeny Tests which show a reliable, large advantage in growth rate and carcass weights for progeny born to Simmental sires.

They say the strong, extended swing by commercial beef farmers to the Angus breed presents a massive opportunity for Simmental. "A lot of commercial farmers have used Angus bulls at the expense of crossbreeding and the benefits of hybrid vigour for close to three decades now," Absolom says.

But now the realisation is growing that Simmental has a set of attributes to complement the modern-day Angus, predominantly as a terminal sire.

None of the progeny test results come as a surprise to Simmental breeders as the breed advantage has been well documented and proven over the past 50 years. "The awareness and momentum have been building since the first progeny test results started being released. It's real third-party data and in multiple commercial environments, so it's good for the breed," Absolom says.

Sanson also expects more farmers with larger beef cow herds to adopt the trend showing up in sheep systems where only enough females are mated to produce sufficient heifer replacements, and the rest go terminal sire. "In most beef herds, farmers could get sufficient heifer replacements from two to three age groups, and potentially all their mixed-age cows could go to Simmental bulls," he says. "The weight advantage, be it weight gain to weaning or slaughter carcass weight, is clear. The other advantage is shorter days to optimal carcass weight or harvest, so fewer days onfarm and ultimately a smaller environmental footprint."

Both are confident that with the right genetics and feeding, commercial farmers using Simmental bulls in a terminal beef system, particularly over Angus cows, will be capable of slaughtering steers before their second winter. "It's really a case of breed complementarity, the Simmental over the Angus of today, so you get the growth and weight advantage of Simmental with the carcass merit of Angus," Absolom says. "You don't want to sacrifice marbling, and the modern Simmental has the ability to do this, hence its place as the preferred cross with Angus."

ABOVE From left, Tom Sanson, Daniel Absolom and Jason Archer at the March 2024 Lochinver Field Day.

There is good variation in marbling showing up in the Simmental gene pool in New Zealand and breeders and commercial farmers have a marbling EBV to use in their selection. "We've known that Simmental have good marbling from data from other countries like the United States where there's been a payment structure that rewards farmers for marbling for many years," Absolom continues.

A good New Zealand example is progeny from the Simmental sire Rissington New Standard AU158 in the Beef Progeny Test, who was ranked first out of 242 sires for yearling weight, 18-month weight, eye muscle area and fourth for marbling. The weight difference between his average for 18-month progeny and the sire with the lightest 18-month progeny average was 72 kg. "On killing 18-month cattle at $5.50/kg, and allowing for dressing percentage, that's about an extra $210 per calf and $8,400 over that calf crop if you sell all 40 calves from that sire that year," Absolom says.

It is reinforced by the dominance of Simmental bulls in crossbreeding programmes over Angus cows in the United States. One of the advantages of Simmental underused by commercial farmers is the breed's maternal ability, which is currently being investigated at the Beef + Lamb NZ Genetics Progeny Test at Lochinver Station in central North Island.

It has been long recognised in other markets like the US. "There are a lot of Simmental-Angus bulls sold in that US market today. The Simmental is recognised as one of the few European breeds that doesn't compromise Angus marbling," Absolom continues.

Several Simmental breeders are running programmes to breed Black Simmental bulls as an option for beef producers keen to maintain a solid black coloured cow herd.

The recent Beef Progeny Test results show there is significant hybrid vigour from the maternal side when crossbred cows are mated to terminal sires, backing up earlier research from the seventies in the US which showed a 23% increase in kilograms of calf weaned per cow mated. "Many farmers still choose to have purebred commercial cows. But they are walking away from the free lunch offered by hybrid vigour from having crossbred cows. There wouldn't be many industries where you can get a 23 per cent lift (in production) yet the majority of commercial farmers choose not to take it up," Absolom says.

Moderate cow size has also been maintained and some temperament issues from the past have been sorted with the help of a docility estimated breeding value (EBV) developed for the breed which allowed breeders to cull troublesome animals from their herds.

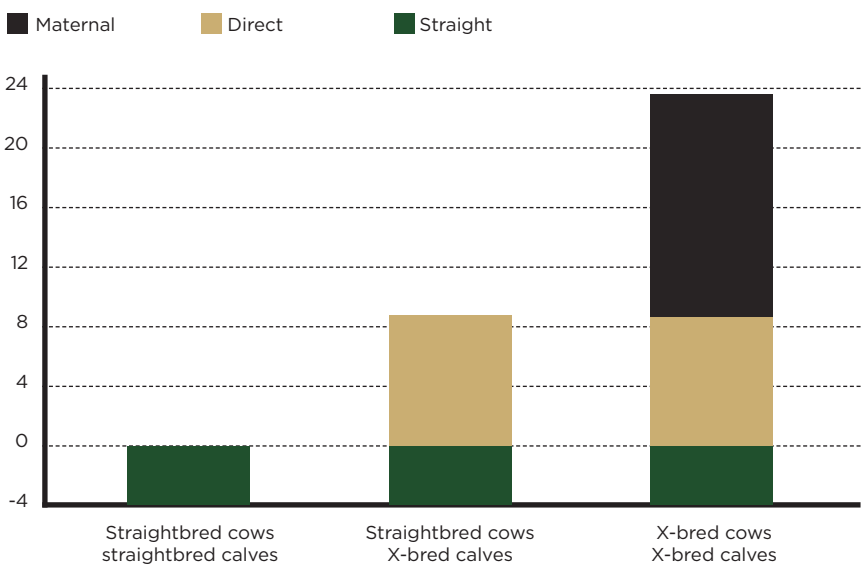
Adding to growing demand for sires, Sanson says there are also signs emerging of an increase in the cattle component on many hill country farms which he expects will continue if the downward pressure remains on sheepmeat and wool returns. "It is being driven by a combination of things apart from lower farmgate returns. Drench resistance is a big issue in many sheep flocks these days and there's also the challenge of finding staff to handle the high workload of large sheep flocks," he says. "Any increase in cattle numbers, particularly cows, will create demand for more bulls, so we need to be ready to capitalise on that change."

Looking ahead, they say it will be up to Simmental seed stock producers to promote the advantages of the breed to commercial beef farmers, and capitalise on the complementarity it offers, especially to commercial Angus cow herds.

Simmental NZ may not have as many breeders as it did in the halcyon days but they are spread across the country and equipped with independent research to support the growth in demand for bulls.

As a breed, Simmental is also developing a niche in the dairy sector so there is plenty of upside available to grow market share, especially now most dairy companies are enforcing a reduction in bobby calf slaughter by their suppliers. "There's exciting times ahead because of this collision of technologies unlocking huge potential to lift productivity and profitability onfarm," Absolom says. "The likes of NAIT which gives us individual animal identification, the Beef + Lamb Progeny Test data for both beef and dairy beef, genomic tools, and the

PER CENT INCREASE IN WEIGHT OF CALF WEANED PER COW EXPOSED TO BREEDING



actual carcass data from the processors, and all of that objective data available to seed stock producers and commercial farmers, is so compelling for Simmental."

Sanson and Absolom are also excited about the potential generated from the recent launch of a new genetic evaluation for Simmental with International Genetic Solutions (IGS) which has recently taken over the breed data analysis after three decades with Australasian provider Breedplan.

The IGS move means data from Simmental NZ, Simmental Australia, American Simmental and Canadian Simmental is now part of one unique global evaluation.

IGS has more than 22 million animals with over 500,000 genotypes in its database, creating a genuine international database and hugely improving the accuracy of EBVs offered at bull sale time for commercial farmers. "The great advantage at the outset is there are 241 New Zealand sires with progeny in multiple databases, creating important linkages and better accuracy," Absolom says. "The numbers are staggering and it's a huge leg-up for Simmental in New Zealand to be able to leverage a dataset of this size.

"IGS can include all the historic actual carcass data from the Beef + Lamb Progeny Tests and greatly enhance the carcass EBVs. Historically the carcass EBVs have been driven off carcass ultrasound and correlated traits, but nothing beats actual carcass data."

BLACK SIMMENTAL IDEAL CHOICE FOR ANGUS HERDS

Black-coated Simmental bulls are tipped to become more mainstream as the surge in Angus cow numbers continues.

Simmental NZ Councillor Garry McCorkindale is one of several seed stock producers who have followed the global shift to breed black-coated Simmental bulls for the commercial market in New Zealand.

These bulls are increasingly popular among Angus cow herd owners looking to retain the black colour of their calf progeny, but capitalise on the hybrid vigour coming from the Simmental genetics.

Otago-based McCorkindale operates the Glenside stud and says the Simmental has always been highly regarded for its terminal sire capabilities in crossbreeding programmes, but it has strong maternal qualities too.

More than 80% of the Simmental studs in the United States had embraced breeding Black Simmentals for the past two decades, mostly in response to the growing dominance of Angus as the preferred choice among cow herd owners. A similar trend is sweeping through Australia too.

Fellow Simmental NZ Councillor Tom Sanson of Gold Creek Simmentals agrees, and recently started his own programme to breed Black Simmentals with females from a small group of New Zealand herds with surplus stock available. "Black Simmentals already enjoy a great name and reputation in the US and Australian markets, where they are well established by farmers who are looking for more," he says. "These cattle are well known and followed not just for their fantastic growth rates and carcass yield, but also their low birth weight, calving ease and fertility – attributes often not associated with Simmentals."

Black Simmentals are a stabilised Simmental-Angus cross which can also perform well in intra-muscular fat and marbling scoring. "When first crossed with Angus, there's a huge boost in performance of the progeny. They also retain and remain black and polled," Sanson continues.

With the beef cow herd and market dominated by Angus, Sanson says Black Simmentals offer commercial farmers another option, with renowned terminal sire qualities plus its maternal and great eating quality characteristics.