

THE PERFECT COW

New breed gets extensive testing

By KATE BERTIN
For the Gazette

MANY MONTANANS pride themselves on being a breed apart. In the past 10 years, Billings rancher Warren Levang has taken that sentiment literally.

After years of listening to ranch feeders and packers lament the problems in various kinds of cattle, Levang set out on a mission to create the perfect cow. To assist him, he enlisted the genetics departments of our major universities and interviewed dozens of ranchers, feeders and packers.

Levang dubbed the resulting animal the "Black Maximizer," and has been successfully marketing the breed to commercial cattlemen and the country.

"The need was there to bring all elements of this chain together," Levang said. "The timing was right, because everybody was motivated to it."

One of the reasons Levang decided to create a new breed of cattle is because of a lack of consistency in American beef. Right now in this country there are 104 different cattle breeds, not to mention all the cross-breed commercial cows, he said. As a result, feeders are left with an enormous variety of cattle breeds, dispositions and carcass qualities, making it more difficult to produce top-quality beef every time.

"Feeders don't know how to handle them," he said. "By narrowing down the breeds, we could get more predictability."

For the rancher, Levang set out to breed in calving ease, quick growth, rich milk, black hides and rounded heads. For the feeders, he wanted the animals tame, with a good disposition, and again no horns. Feeders also wanted cattle that could efficiently convert feed into weight gain, big ribeye, low backfat and high yields of red meat, along with a medium frame.

In general, the beef consumer wants predictable, consistent meat that is lean, flavorful and tender. Combining all those attributes is no small task.

When Levang started this titanic project, he had no idea of the kind of obstacles he would face.

"I just always thought I could do it," he said with his ever-present optimism. "I didn't know it would be so tough. I'm just an optimist, I guess." He started with biological types, creating a general breed of cattle that could have high milk, high growth, large frames, small frames, and so on, trying to figure out what combination would be best.

"I soon found out it was a little more than I knew," he said. To help him reach his goal, he put together a team that included Cornell University, University of California, Davis, Colorado State, U-Bozeman, Monfort Packers and Cattle, Colo., and Horton's

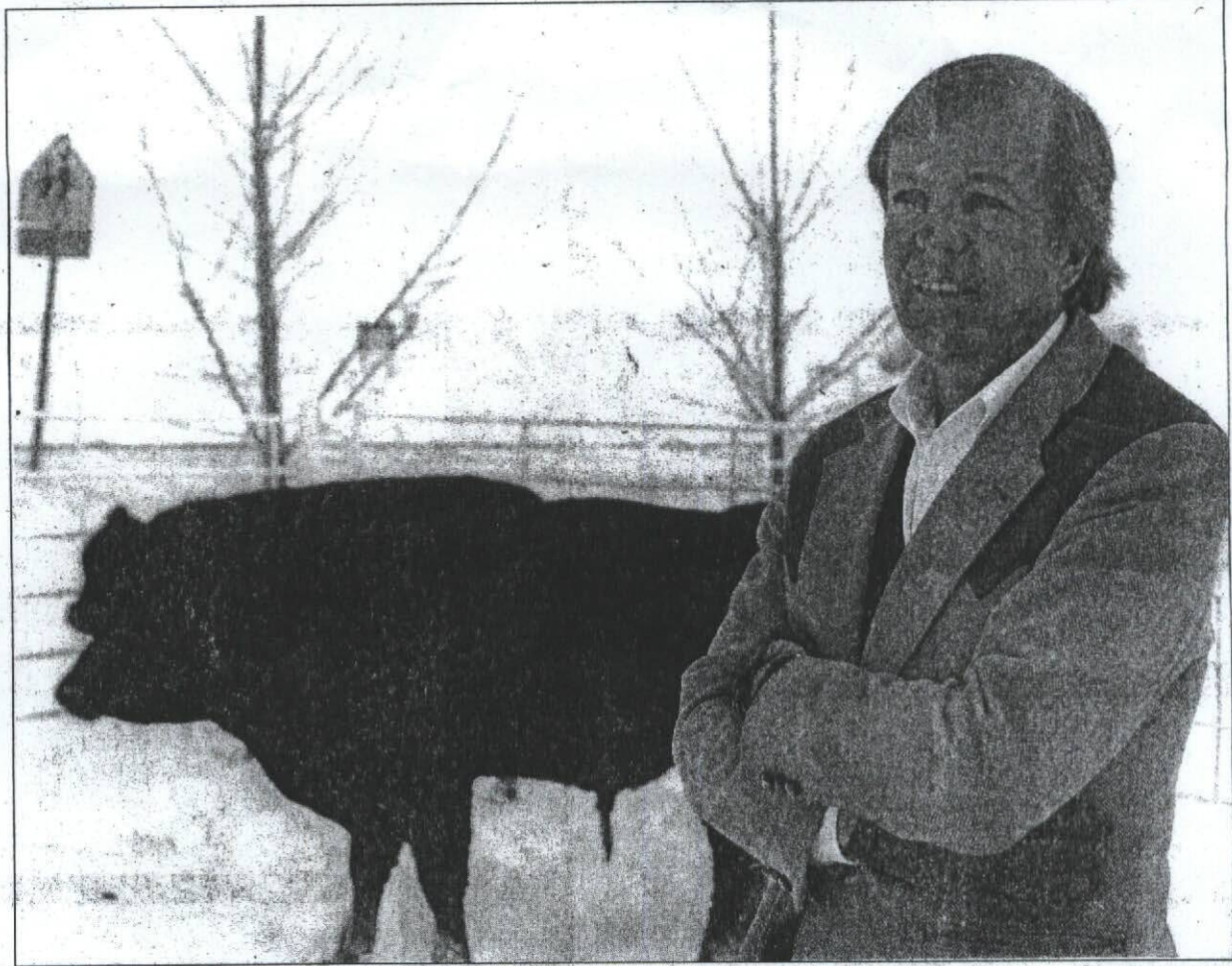


Photo by Kate Bertin

Billings rancher Warren Levang says he developed the Black Maximizer to bring more consistency to the beef market.

Research and Development Center, among others. They helped him chart a course through the stormy waters of genetic research.

"I had troubles, but I just had to keep going," Levang said. "I pictured in my mind what I wanted. I just kept shaping and shaping."

After years of testing, the group finally decided on a combination they deemed perfect for the job. They combined three cattle breeds in varying percentages — half Continental for good growth, half English for good carcass traits — to come up with the Black Maximizer. The actual breeds and percentages are in the process of being patented, so Levang couldn't share the specifics.

According to Levang, getting the percentages just right was the difficult part. "You'd end up getting too much one breed, not enough of the other," he said.

Once he had the breed proportions right, Levang said, he searched out the best bulls and cows for each part of his combination to create a herd of Black Maximizer foundation cattle. He plans to keep the foundation cattle as a control over the quality of the breed. Black Maximizer cattle are designed to cross well with almost any other breed, he said, and the half-blood cattle are extremely popular with commercial cattle producers. Breeders can also purchase Black Maximizer semen to use in their artificial insemination programs. Crossing with Levang's breed means instant heterosis, or a

release of a particular breed's inbred traits, he said.

All of Levang's cattle are tested extensively by third-party testing facilities. If the animals don't make the grade, fitting all of his criteria for the breed, he doesn't keep them, he said.

Other composite breeds give the customer a formula for creating the cross, but offer no consistency because there's so much variation within the breed, Levang said. The foundation cows give him more control over the end product.

Horton's Research and Development Center in Colorado has conducted much of the testing on Black Maximizers. Many of the tests look at common production parameters: gain, feed efficiency, carcass data, yield and ribeye area.

Scott Huse, director of research at Horton's, applauded Levang's effort to create a beef animal that's been thoroughly tested in all facets of production. In general, the beef industry has failed to keep up with other food-animal producers, such as swine breeders, in terms of genetic testing information and control.

"I don't think there's a beef breeder in the U.S. who can tell you the feed efficiency of the progeny of one of his bulls," Huse said. "Essentially they haven't gone the distance and looked at the efficiency of those animals in the feed yard."

Among other things, Horton tests the Maximizer breed for feed efficiency. Huse said Levang has got a good start on breeding the kind of

cow he set out to create. By testing extensively, he's been able to cull potentially damaging genetic flaws from his foundation herd.

"I would say the best thing about these animals is just the fact that they have been scrutinized by something more than just the eye and gut feel," Huse said. "I'm not saying you should completely give up the eye and gut feel, but it's sure nice to have some data to go along with the more traditional criteria you look at."

Eastern Montana cattle rancher Bob Gibbs used Black Maximizers on more than 100 of his cows this year. Although some of the calves had birthweights of more than 90 pounds, none of the cows needed assistance in calving, he said.

"We've been real pleased with them. They calve real easy," Gibbs said. "We saved almost all the heifer calves we got, and we're going to put them into our own herd."

This year Levang's bulls had about 1,000 calves "on the ground." He plans to continue testing on all the animals. With genetic research, the results often take years to assess. Today's technology — ultrasound, embryo transplant, reproductive tract scores and artificial insemination — make the process a little quicker. Still, it's a long, slow process.

"It's slower doing it my way, no doubt about that," he said. "It's not the quick route, but it's the surer thing for the customer."