



SOUTH POLL GRASS CATTLE ASSOCIATION

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South Poll Grass Cattle Association delegates travel to Panama

By Bruce Shanks

My wife Sunshine and I, owners of Sasafra Valley Ranch in Belle, Mo., had the opportunity to represent the South Poll Grass Cattle Association on a trade mission to Panama Dec. 8-12, 2015. The delegation was sponsored by the Missouri Department of Agriculture and the United States Genetic Livestock Export, Inc. and was led by Ms. Melissa Miller, Marketing Specialist with the Missouri Department of Agriculture. Other delegates included a representative from the Beefmaster cattle association and Allied Genetic Resources.

Our trip to visit and view the Panamanian beef industry began with a flight into Panama City, Panama, near the famous Panama Canal. On day two, we met with the Panama National Cattlemen's Association (ANAGAN) president and leaders from every province. Later that day, we met with the Vice Minister of Agriculture, the National Director of Livestock, the Livestock Technical Secretary and the Coordinator for Beef Products at the Ministry of Agriculture Development headquarters. These leaders explained the challenges and opportunities unique to Panama's cattle industry. With Panama's tropical climate, Brahman-type genetics abound as does plenty of fairly low-quality warm-season forages. As a country, they feed virtually no grain; all cattle are essentially grass-finished and processed for domestic consumption. However, in the Panama City area, imported U.S. beef was common on the menu. As a country, their average conception rate is 50% with an average age of first conception of 4 years, apparently as a result of genetics and nutrition/management constraints. They harvest bulls (some steers) at weights near 1,100 pounds at an average of 4 years of age.

On the third day, we traveled into the

countryside and visited a large cattle ranch with predominantly Brahman genetics; however, they had utilized some crossbreeding with Simmental, Braunvieh, and most recently Senepol. The ranch owner suggested that he was happy with the Senepol cross and seemed open and enthusiastic when presented information regarding South Poll genetics. This ranch also incorporated some electric fencing and rotational grazing strategies. At midday, we traveled to a stockyard where their weekly cattle auction was ensuing. Once again, Brahman genetics made up the offering; I witnessed one Brahman bull that had a frame score of at least 9 in my estimation. In order to sort cattle without having to enter the pens, workers used sorting sticks that were 10 feet long or more. Their cattle prices seemed to be a little lower than ours, but were somewhat comparable. Later, we visited a dairy with Holstein and Jersey crossed with Gyr, another Bos Indicus, heat-adapted breed. In our travels that day,

the challenges of this country's tropical environment became more evident.

On the day before we traveled back to the U.S., we caught a short flight to the Province of Chiriqui. The area of Chiriqui has a higher elevation and is cooler than much of the rest of the country. We were picked up at the airport by Diccon Curry, a rancher, Gal-

lagher fence product distributor, and without question a candidate for the world's craziest driver. We traveled first to his farm and looked at his cattle and very intensive grazing system. We next met with a Santa Gertrudis, Simmental, and Beefmaster breeder that was educated at Iowa State University. This farm was similar to what might be seen in the U.S. Although his cattle looked better to me, they were also on a higher plane of nutrition. We finished the day at Janson Coffee farm in the volcanic highlands of Chiriqui. Certainly, this farm was a highlight of the trip, especially drinking coffee off of his deck surrounded by coffee shrubs and the smell of coffee permeating the air. This gentleman had imported some Black and Red Angus cattle that he had crossed with indigenous Brahman. One of his Red Brangus cows was very impressive; she was very slick, moderate, thick, and had a great





Scenes from Panamanian ranches and a stockyard



Mountainous terrain in the Chiriqui Province

udder.
Our trip to Panama was very enjoyable, the weather was great, and we made some new friends. While there, we handed out several English and Spanish SPGCA brochures and South Poll calendars. Additionally, we made contacts with individuals interested in importing South Poll semen to Panama. We plan to ship some South Poll semen into Panama to two contacts that are willing to experiment with the breed. Also, beginning plans are already being made to host a couple of Panamanians next summer. From my perspective, Panama cattle producers could greatly benefit from South Poll genetics, especially to moderate size without sacrificing environmental adaptation. I see a real future for the breed in Panama and look forward to opportunities the SPGCA association, members, and breeders can gain from the experiences set in motion by this trade mission.



Sunshine Shanks

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