Study seeking ideal La. crossbreed

Crossbred cattle have come to represent the necessary ingredient in the Southern cattle industry, according to Bruce Greene, Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station animal scientist.

Greene is studying the optimum mix of breeds for Louisiana conditions at the Hill Farm Research Station at Homer.

"It has been established for a long time that you need a crossbred cow for better maternal traits in your cows, to get higher reproductive efficiency, more calves produced, more calves weaned at heavier weaning weights," Greene said in a news release from the Extension Service.

"And also you need the Brahman-cross cow in this part of the country because of its ability to withstand the heat a little better, to withstand the parasites we have and probably for its ability to better digest the lower quality forages that we have in the South," he said.

Greene's breeding program will cross Brahman-Hereford cows with three different breeds of bulls: the Gelbvieh from Germany, Angus from England and a breed called Gelbray, a Brahman-Gelbvieh cross developed in East Feliciana Parish.

"We want to produce a lean animal but maintain the quality of the beef," Greene said. "That is one of the reasons we are looking at the Gelbvieh and Gelbray bulls as terminal sires, because they have been reported to have higher meat quality. But we have to maintain a balance between the quality and the amount of fat in the beef."

The Brahman breed presents a problem with maturity. Heifers tend to mature later and reproduce later.

"Think reproduction is one of the most important aspects of our research, because that is one of the biggest problems for Louisiana producers," Greene said. "It is important to get a heifer to breed as a two-year-old. The problem with Brahman-cross cattle is the difficulty of getting them to reach puberty and breed as two-year-olds."

The problem probably originated with breeds that began in areas of extremely low-quality forages, such as semi-arid countries in Africa and the Indian subcontinent, Greene said. Because of inadequate forages, cows produced offspring less frequently, he said.

The obstacle, however, could be overcome through supplemental diets. This also means higher costs.

"We are looking at how much extra feed you can put in them to get them to breed as two-year-olds, if possible. And is it cost effective, is it worth it to do so?" Greene said.

"In this part of the country, probably the better-selling animals are no more than one-fourth Brahman crossed with some English-type cattle - Angus, Hereford or from an exotic bull, a European bull such as a Charolais, Gelbvieh or Simmental," he said. "These types of bulls put a lot of growth on your calves. They are large-frame calves. They do not mature as early, therefore you can get a heavier weight on them in the feedlot without producing a lot of fat."

"The half-Brahman cow is reported to be the most efficient cow for this area, for this environment. But she generally does not produce a calf until she is 30 months or 36 months old. You still miss that first calf as compared with an Angus or a Hereford animal, which generally breed and drop calves at two years of age," Greene said.