Our first stop on the Mountain State Tour to West Virginia was at the West Virginia University Reymann Memorial Farm, Wardensville. Jerry Yates, farm manager, runs 2 bull tests during the year – one in the summer (which just concluded) and one in the winter. The winter test concludes with a sale the end of March. The bulls are fed a silage-based diet to gain about 3.25 lb a day.

The highlight of the stop was the Grow Safe Feed System, the first system installed at a bull test station in the US. Passive feed intake is monitored via radio frequency identification tags. The system was developed by two individuals with no knowledge of the beef industry. One worked for Electrolux developing commercial vacuum systems, the other worked with radio frequency monitoring of train cars. It was originally developed to monitor intake for an ostrich farm. Death loss was 94% after 30 days. The farmer said if he could figure out which ostrich chicks weren’t eating he could significantly cut mortality.

Occupancy at the bunk can vary day to day for each bull. He showed us some of the data from the summer test. Intake can indicate illness; he needs to look for trends and not be quick to assume a bull is sick.

The Angus data from the bull test will be combined with data from other bull tests that utilize the Grow Safe system to develop a Residual Feed Intake EPDs using 20,000-30,000 bulls. The trait is moderately heritable with no or little negative effect on other traits.

A lacking component is automatic weight measurements. Jerry pointed out how stressful running the bulls through the chute to weigh them. They can be off feed for 2 days for the first few times run through the chute. Progress is being made using body measurements taken electronically to accurately estimate weights.

Nancy Glazier, NWNY Dairy, Livestock & Field Crops Team. Cornell Cooperative Extension