Cobb kicks off 100 year celebration at 2015 Conference

As the world’s leading poultry breeding company, Cobb-Vantress will be celebrating its first 100 years in 2016. A century that has moved the industry from small-scale pedigree breeders to the world of hi-tech genomics today ... and taken chicken from a rare luxury to a much enjoyed everyday meal.

The breed has its origins on a family farm at Littleton, Massachusetts, in the north east corner of the USA, where two generations of the Cobb family pioneered the development of the modern broiler from the traditional dual-purpose breeds that were primarily egg layers.

The acquisition by the pharmaceutical manufacturer Upjohn in the 1970s and the transition into ownership by Tyson Foods in the following decades moved the business into the modern era where global revenues became essential to sustain investment in research and development. During the transition, the Cobb breed became united with the Vantress male lines which Tyson Foods had been developing.

This autumn’s Global Distributor Conference at Boston, Massachusetts, marked the beginning of celebrations to commemorate the first 100 years. The International Poultry Expo at Atlanta in January will be a special occasion for Cobb with a brand new tradeshow booth marking the start of the next 100 years.

The centennial logo will feature prominently around the world, a special advertising campaign and editorial in leading poultry media will commemorate the anniversary, and there is a section on the corporate website looking at Cobb history.

During 2016 Cobb Focus will be reporting on centennial activities, looking back to memorable events that have shaped the modern breed and looking ahead to what the future might hold.
How genomics is benefiting the Cobb research program

In our last edition, Cobb director of genetics Dr Frank Siewerdt spoke about the breeding program and the further opportunities for great strides in feed efficiency. In this interview Dr RACHEL HAWKEN, Cobb director of genomics and quantitative genetics, tells us about the fast developing science of genomics.

Roger Ranson

Let’s look first at the joint project with Hendrix Genetics which has recently been renewed for a further three years, that will take it to ten years in total. What are you aiming to achieve with this project?

Rachel Hawken

Cobb and Hendrix Genetics have a lot in common; both companies put a large amount of time and research dollars to identify more accurate and more efficient ways to improve the genetics of our livestock species. We both utilize a lot of similar tools and technologies but these tools and technologies are evolving as researchers also find more efficient methods to achieve their goal. Genomic technologies are one such technology. Determining the most efficient use of genomic technologies, ways to implement those technologies and determine the value of that technology are key points that both our companies spend a large amount of effort investigating.

This collaboration between Hendrix and Cobb allows us both to openly exchange information that is to the benefit of both companies. But it’s not just about genomic tools. There are other tools around the collection and analysis of data pertaining to the performance of our livestock species. Both companies can benefit by exchanging experiences and technology availability to help us both maintain a competitive advantage in the market.

RR

It is really relating individual genes to traits. That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?

RH

There are many different ways you can use genomics. One is relating individual genes to the improvement of broiler performance, another way is measuring the ‘true’ relationships between birds. In the past if you look at family genetic relationships, all brothers and sisters were assumed as having a relationship of 50%. In other words, they share half of their genetics with their sibling. But this is just an average figure. With genomics we can estimate the genetic relationship between family members more accurately. Instead of assuming that all full brothers and sisters have a relationship of 50% we can now detect that some full brothers and sisters share only 30% of their genome while others might share 70%. And that is the biggest impact that genome selection has to improving our genetic gain - improving the estimation of familial relationships.

RR

One tangible example of success is developing this chip for analysing 60,000 variations in the DNA sequence. Where might this be taking us in the future?

RH

Let’s take a step back. A great deal of effort has been made towards completing the chicken genome sequence. In reality though the genome sequence is a series of 1.2 billion characters in the form of four letters – A G C and T. So if you were to read it from end to end it would be approximately the size of seventy 1000-page Manhattan telephone books – which is about one third of the size of a human genome.

We don’t want to look at all of those 1.2 billion A G C T’s for every chicken. That’s too much information to look at on hundreds of thousands of birds, and it’s too expensive. But we can look at just 60,000 points within the genome, and that is why this chip was developed. It contains 60,000 of
those 1.2 billion spots of DNA and provides a tool for us to determine both the relationships between birds within a population, and the impact of particular genes on the expression of a phenotype like bodyweight.

So, for example, if a DNA variation exists in the growth hormone gene it may affect growth rate. But it’s never that easy because all the characteristics of a chicken that we measure are highly complex. So if you consider weight gain, this is a function of appetite, growth, immunity etc. It’s a function of so many biological processes that we can’t ever just look at one gene. It’s always the impact of many thousands of genes. Genomic selection works by allowing us to look at the whole genome together rather than just one small part of the genome, and this is what our chip allows us to do.

**RR** Aside from that joint project with Hendrix, you are also working with the Roslin Institute in Scotland on two projects. How far have you got with these and what are they aiming to achieve?

**RH** These are very exciting projects. The project that’s of great interest at the moment is a joint project funded through the UK Government’s ‘Innovate UK’ agency. This is a large grant we received towards the cryopreservation of chickens. Chickens are different from mammals in that we can’t freeze the germplasm (eggs and sperm) of chickens to regenerate an individual as you can in mammals, like humans or cattle. In order to keep a chicken line available for future use we have to keep a live copy of that line. This is not only an expensive exercise but also a risky exercise.

There are several advantages to having cryopreservation technology. One is genetic security. What would happen if something like highly pathogenic avian influenza went through one of our pedigree farms? It could potentially wipe out all of those very important lines that contribute to the products we sell to our customers. Right now to mitigate that risk we keep multiple copies of our lines in various global regions. If something were to happen to one farm, we could always supply product from another farm. It’s an expensive but necessary process to secure our genetic resources. Having cryopreservation technology allows us to have a freezer copy of our lines so if anything catastrophic were to happen, we could regenerate the population and move forward.

**RR** It all sounds very exciting. How far are you from doing that in practice?

**RH** This is a three-year project and we are only in the first year. Scientists at the Roslin Institute have been working on components of this technology for a long time. They’ve proven most of the different components of this technology in various other projects. Now we’re just putting it together and we’re using our Vantress historical line as a proof of concept to freeze down a broiler line. Once the technology is verified and confirmed we will be able to cryopreserve some of the other lines… or potentially all of our lines.

**RR** Now another big investment has been in Holland where Cobb has doubled the size and scope of the Herveld research farm. Is that specifically to breed chickens suited to a European environment or a European type of diet?

**RH** I think the goals of that expansion are two-fold. One goal is similar to what I mentioned earlier – to maintain copies of our pure lines in separate environments for genetic security purposes. The second goal is providing a product to the Europe, Middle East and Africa region that has a competitive advantage in that environment. Nutrition, as you mentioned, is just one of those environmental influences. You also have to consider management practices, climate, political regulations, animal health and certainly social expectations of each ‘environment’. All of those things combined have an impact on broiler production and performance, and subsequently on our ability to provide a competitive product and competitive advantage for our customers.
Leading figures in the global poultry industry took part in the week-long Cobb-Vantress, Inc. 5th Distributor Conference at Boston, Massachusetts, USA, marking the start of celebrations to commemorate the first 100 years of Cobb in 2016.

More than 140 senior representatives from 51 Cobb grandparent distributors and customers from 34 countries were among almost 200 people attending the event at the historic Fairmont Copley Plaza, Boston.

Jerry Moye (right), president of Cobb-Vantress, stated: “To celebrate our centennial anniversary with the extended Cobb family of distributors was a very special privilege. These friends have been integral to Cobb’s success, and I can’t think of a better way to enter the next century than to have all of them at our side.”

Boston was chosen for two reasons. “First, Robert Cobb senior started in the breeding business nearby in the town of Littleton, Massachusetts,” said Moye. “Second, Boston sits at the heart of the birth of the United States and provides a great venue to get a glimpse of our country’s history.”

The Cobb poultry breeding business – the oldest in the world – was based at Concord and Littleton for almost 70 years until its
move to the current headquarters in Arkansas.

The morning business sessions were followed by afternoon programs that included visits to the Freedom Trail, Harvard University and a tour of the Concord and Lexington area where the first skirmish of the American Revolutionary War took place in 1775.

Among the guest speakers were Donnie Smith (top right), president and CEO of Tyson Foods, parent company of Cobb-Vantress; Louise Fresco, president of the executive board of Wageningen University and Research Centre, Netherlands; Bill Cordingley (above right), managing director of Rabobank Global Sector Head, Animal Protein, New York; Dr Lowell B. Catlett (right), Regents professor from New Mexico State University, and Jeff Simmons (above left), president of Elanco.

"It’s an honor to welcome our partners from across the globe to celebrate the Cobb-Vantress 100th anniversary," said Donnie Smith. "This incredible milestone was made possible by the tenacity, hard work and dedication of the Cobb team members over the past century. If history is any indication, the future is bright for Cobb and all the global distributors who’ve helped make this company the world leader in broiler breeding."

Evening events included a Wednesday dinner party at the Harvard Club with a special performance by the Harvard Krokodiloes, a men’s acappella group. A banquet on Thursday evening featured a keynote address from Ambassador Nicholas Burns, Harvard University Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy and International Politics. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum was the venue for the final evening. The customers were greeted by a fife and drum corps as they enjoyed the display of a renovated 1929 Ford Model A truck. Each guest toured the museum and later enjoyed a farewell dinner along with a video presentation that featured memorable clips of the week-long event.

The Cobb global distributor conference is normally held every four years and has grown significantly in size and stature since the first in San Antonio, Texas, in 1998. This was followed by others at San Francisco, Las Vegas and San Diego with the timing of the latest conference held back by one year so it could mark the beginning of the celebrations that will continue through the centennial year in 2016.
The power of the Cobb brand

Roger Vessell, director of worldwide marketing, looks at how the Cobb marketing team provides global support to the brand.

1. What are the most important achievements of the marketing department over the past two years?

There are four key global achievements that we are very proud of - our updated Cobb Brand Guidelines, our Global Sustainability Report, our ongoing strategic Digital Media Communications plan and holding the 2015 Cobb distributor conference, kicking off our centennial celebration.

Cobb Brand Guidelines

The power of the Cobb brand is well recognized worldwide. Brand guidelines assist in developing and increasing brand awareness, achieving consistency and ensuring that we are always perceived just as we intend.

A clear set of brand guidelines is essential for promoting Cobb’s corporate recognition, adding impact and focus to all of our marketing efforts and communication activities. The Cobb brand is far more than just a logo - our brand represents everything about who we are, what we do and how we do it. Successful brands build secure, long lasting relationships. Cobb has become the trusted industry leader through our heritage, products, legendary service, core values and talented team members.

It is important that everyone within the world of Cobb understands and fully engages with these brand guidelines. Implementing them will assist everyone, both within Cobb and our distributor network, to achieve a unified style and approach across all platforms.

Global Sustainability Report

Cobb was extremely pleased to release its first global sustainability report – ‘Our role in building a sustainable future for the world’.

The report provides a comprehensive and transparent review of our commitment to social progress, environmental stewardship and responsible product development. It details our community support efforts, our environmental impact and management parameters and the systems which ensure the production of safe, increasingly more efficient poultry protein worldwide. It also reflects Cobb’s commitment to building a sustainable future for employees, customers and communities where we are located.

We are particularly proud of the GRI ‘A’ grade achieved for this report. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is a non-profit organization that promotes economic sustainability and produces one of the world’s most respected standards for sustainability reporting.

Digital Media Communications Strategy

We are now seeing the benefits of our global digital communications strategy launched two years ago.

A website architecture/content redesign was undertaken to present Cobb as the industry leader in research and development and, equally, share our breadth of knowledge with customers around the world in their local languages. Through social media - Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter - we are continuing to reach out to our friends in the industry and provide news, educational material, industry knowledge and helpful hints through our mobile social media platforms. During the past year, our likes on Facebook have doubled with new friends excited to follow us. And don't forget the 'Throwback Thursday' when we look back at what has happened over the past 100 years to make Cobb the trusted global leader it is today.

Cobb Intranet

The Cobb Intranet meets the daily needs of Cobb business units. We wanted to create a site that looked like Cobb; a site that provides easy reach to the many files and information many of us use daily. At the core the intranet site is a repository of our links and internal knowledge. We thought about what it meant symbolically – the “home” of so much of who we are. We are a family working together towards a common goal.

2. What are the current major areas of focus globally for the marketing department?

Our three key global projects are preparing for our Cobb 100th Anniversary, developing the Image Library and continuous improvement in our Digital Media Communications.

Cobb 100th Year Anniversary

This is an exciting milestone for Cobb, the world’s oldest poultry breeding company. The Global Distributor Conference in Boston marked the start of our celebrations - including the launch of the centennial logo that will be used throughout 2016. We have created a special advertisement campaign scheduled for 2016, a brand new Cobb trade show booth for the International Poultry Expo at Atlanta, USA, in January and a dedicated ‘history’ section on our corporate website.

Global Image Library

The new image library is designed to capture, categorize and make available pictures from all regions. This will provide easy access to images relating to each business unit – eg, Research and Development, Quality, Animal Welfare and Technical Service.

The library will provide the images needed for PowerPoint presentations, marketing collateral material projects, editorial activities and print/digital advertisements. The project is a major undertaking, but when completed will be extremely beneficial for all global team members.

All of these projects could not have been achieved without the efforts of all of our regional marketing team members worldwide. ☺
Anniversary honor for Avitalsa in Ecuador

During the Latin American Poultry Congress in Ecuador, Cobb honored Avitalsa with a commemorative plaque for its 20 years in the poultry industry.

“We were very proud to take part in such an important moment for Avitalsa and we hope our partnership continues to grow and develop for many years to come,” said Cassiano Bevilaqua, Cobb marketing manager.

“As Avitalsa is one of the leading companies in the poultry production sector in Ecuador, we know how important this partnership is to ensure Cobb’s presence in this region.”

The Latin American Poultry Congress brings together some 3000 people, and hosts 60 presentations and two forums with speakers from around the world. Cobb presentations included Rodrigo Terra, Cobb product manager, on genetic progress in broilers and genetic transfer, Algis Martinez, Cobb world technical support team specialist, spoke on health status of the regional poultry industry and directions for the future.

Research focus for Australasian seminar

More than 30 delegates from 10 companies across Australia and New Zealand took part in a two-day Cobb’s seminar in Sydney, Australia, where the focus was on the company’s global research investment.

“It was an ideal opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to the region and to highlight our recent investment in our research and development program in Europe and globally,” said Stan Reid, Cobb vice president for North and South America.

“Given the positive traction of Cobb products in this region, it was also a great opportunity to share best practice updates and performance benchmarks with our customers.”

Among the companies represented were Baiada, Ingham’s, Bromley Park, Red Lea, Hazeldene’s, Cordina Farms, Tablebirds, Darwarlia Group, Hi Chick and Turi Foods.

Pelayo Casanovas, general manager of Cobb Asia-Pacific region, stated: “The conference theme - ‘Committed to Deliver the Best Genetics to the Australian market’ - summarized two clear intentions. Firstly, to guarantee Cobb’s total commitment to support our customers in the Australian market and, secondly, to present the significant genetic pipeline upgrade that Cobb has set up for Australia. More frequent GGP imports, a new product that incorporates lines selected to perform very well at heavy weights, local GGP selections at over 3kg of bodyweight and sourcing from our European breeding program where birds have been selected under conditions closer to those in Australia.

“I am extremely encouraged by the good reception and the opportunity that the Australian customers are giving to Cobb as well as by the commitment that our distributor, Baiada, is putting into making sure we deliver not only the best genetics but also meet the demands of our customers in a timely manner and with outstanding quality. This event is a great opportunity for our customers to discuss particular technical topics and for us to listen closely to what they really want.”

African Poultry Development Ltd seminar features hands on learning

Thirty five delegates attended a three-day Cobb breeder, hatcheries and veterinary seminar at Lusaka, Zambia, hosted by African Poultry Development, the group name of Hybrid Poultry (Zambia), Kenchic (Kenya), Interchic and Tanbreed (Tanzania).

“This provided a unique opportunity to get together and benefit from technical and practical training from experts in their field,” said Simon Wilde, general manager, “From the feedback we realize how valuable the programme of talks, practical workshops and site visits was to all the delegates.”

Technical presentations were given by Cobb poultry specialists Pieter Oosthuysen and Dr Andre Derkx, and Richard Scorgie from Hybrid Poultry Farms. Pieter Oosthuysen emphasized the importance of good rearing programmes for high egg production and covered male management and a new approach to male feeding for optimal reproduction.

Dr Derkx shared his knowledge on vaccination, health monitoring and biosecurity, while Richard Scorgie demonstrated chick grading and embryo diagnosis.
Mississippi ladies luncheon a huge success

The ladies luncheon at the annual convention of the Mississippi Poultry Association gave guests the chance to test their artistic abilities with a distinctly nautical theme.

The 78th annual convention in Destin, Florida, brought together various MPA members, guests and speakers for three days of conference along with sporting and leisure activities.

Sponsors Cobb-Vantress and Huvepharma hosted the ladies luncheon, which this year featured an instructed painting session by Studio by the Sea. Once the painting concluded, there was a raffle and the ladies received gift bags to conclude the luncheon.

Tommy Walker, US technical service representative of Cobb-Vantress, commented: “It has been a pleasure to represent Cobb in hosting the Ladies Luncheon each year. The ladies that attend are wives of the managers we meet each week and it’s a treat for us to put on this activity for them.”

The ladies program has been running for more than 10 years, growing from 45 participants to 80, with Cobb and the MPA seeking to expand the level of participation in the future.

Becky Beard, MPA’s meeting planner commented, “The ladies program at the Mississippi Poultry Association simply would not exist at the level it does without the hard work of the people at Cobb. It is a fun time had by all and we look forward to next year!”

Second Guinness World Record for Akashevo

The largest serving of smoked chicken, prepared and eaten in Yoshkar-Ola, provided the second Guinness World Record for agricultural holding company Akashevo with the support of Rosselkhozbank.

More than 80,000 people from Yoshkar-Ola and the districts of the Mari El Republic witnessed the record attempt when the giant serving of smoked chicken weighing almost two tonnes was made in the form of the logo of Akashevo on Patriarshaya Square, Yoshkar-Ola. The former record was for the largest serving of grilled chicken – a total weight of more than 1726 kg in 2014.

In 2013 the employees of Akashevo made the longest sandwich (90 m) in Russia. In 2012 their first record was listed as cooking 100 m chicken meat shish-kebab. This year on the 10-year anniversary of the company almost 2000 kg of chicken fillet was prepared following a traditional recipe.

European director of genetics

Dr Randy Borg, has been appointed European director of genetics for Cobb.

In his new role, he will be responsible for directing the breeding program at the Cobb pedigree farm at Herveld in the Netherlands, representing research and development in support of Cobb in the EMEA region, and managing the day-to-day external research activities established with European collaborators.

Dr Borg is based in the Netherlands and reports directly to Dr Mitch Abrahamsen, Cobb senior vice president of research and development.

North America technical service

Charles Swain, a Louisiana native and ag-business graduate from Louisiana Tech University, has rejoined the Cobb technical service team and will be responsible for providing technical support to Cobb customers in South Arkansas, Louisiana and Northeast Texas.

Charles worked with Cobb for seven years prior to joining Central Arkansas Poultry Service in June 2014.

“I’m absolutely delighted to have Charles rejoin our team and return to the Cobb family,” commented Ken Semon, technical service manager for Cobb North America.