

TLC & Technology Take Heifer Development to New Levels

by Teres Lambert for *American Red Angus Magazine*

The owners and key employees at Hy Plains Feedyard LLC, Montezuma, Kansas, operate from the philosophy that information is power. This highly progressive feedyard management team relies on information communicated by humans who observe the cattle on a daily basis as well as information provided by the latest technology to assure that market steers and heifers achieve their most ideal harvest end point and reap the benefits on the rail.

5 Reasons Why Ranchers Use a Heifer Growing Program

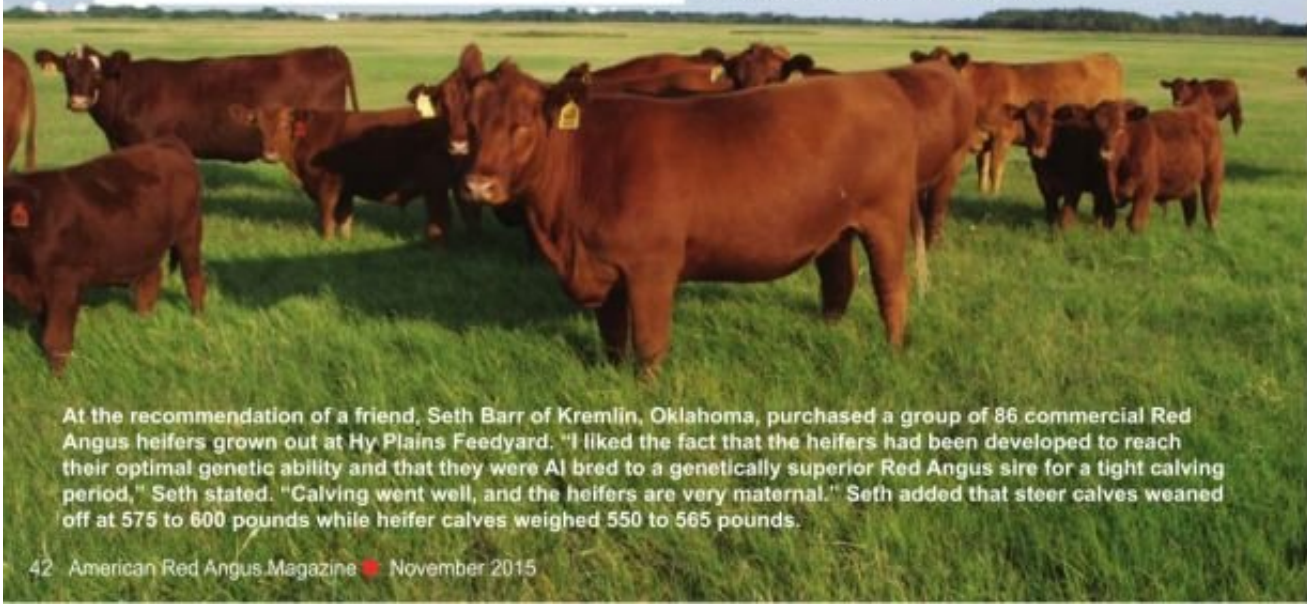
1. Replacement heifers receive the TLC (tender loving care) they deserve, with the extra time and attention paying dividends beyond the first calf.
2. Valuable feed resources on the ranch are more available for the cowherd, particularly the 2- and 3-year-old cows that need them.
3. Opportunity for heifers to be bred AI to superior bulls that have strengths to offset heifer's less-strong areas, resulting in a higher quality calf.
4. Individual heifers return to the ranch with detailed information. This information can be incorporated into ranch management decisions for continued cow success.
5. Each heifer is programmed for success: increased longevity, heavier weaning weights, fewer health challenges, etc.

Formed in 1999, Hy Plains Feedyard has grown from a one-time capacity of 20,000 to 52,000 head. The feedyard is located in what many would consider an "ideal location," as it's within 35 miles from two beef packing plants and 50 miles from two others.

"Both the feeder and the packer understand there are benefits of minimizing the transportation time of the cattle," stated Tom Jones, general manager. "Yield is the greatest driver when it comes to the grid – and about 60 percent of the cattle fed here sell on a grid.

"Less time in transit means less tissue shrink and higher yield."

Many Red Angus cattle, straight bred and crossbred, have been fed at Hy Plains Feedyard.



At the recommendation of a friend, Seth Barr of Kremlin, Oklahoma, purchased a group of 86 commercial Red Angus heifers grown out at Hy Plains Feedyard. "I liked the fact that the heifers had been developed to reach their optimal genetic ability and that they were AI bred to a genetically superior Red Angus sire for a tight calving period," Seth stated. "Calving went well, and the heifers are very maternal." Seth added that steer calves weaned off at 575 to 600 pounds while heifer calves weighed 550 to 565 pounds.

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"The cattle feed well," Jones said, adding that 80 percent of cattle in the feedyard are customer owned while the other 20 percent are owned by the feedyard.

Steers and heifers enter the feedyard in a variety of weights. While a majority of animals are calves in the 350- to 550-pound range, the feedyard also finishes cattle that arrive at the yards as heavy as 900 pounds.

"Our job is to provide a service to whatever the feeding customer needs," said Jones. "The goal, however, is always the same: Feed the cattle to reach about 1,350 pounds – or whatever their optimal end point should be – as efficiently as possible without health and on-the-rail challenges."

Expand to Heifer Growing

About 10 years ago, a customer approached Hy Plains Feedyard about growing heifers that were bound for Russia.

Jones said he was open to the idea for four primary reasons: 1) The feedyard had experience with growing dairy heifers; 2) The feedyard had the room for the heifers; 3) The feedyard's management and nutrition teams had the expertise to help the heifers reach their target weights and condition; and 4) The feedyard's facilities were ideal for growing heifers so they could become healthy, highly productive cows.

"The heifer development service mushroomed from that one opportunity," Jones said.

In the past three to four years, Hy Plains Feedyard has helped grow close to 14,000 heifers for commercial cowmen from across the country as well as for export.



Hy Plains Feedyard's heifer growing management team (l to r) Ronnie Pruitt, Dr. Travis McCarty and Tom Jones, are in constant communication.



Feed rations, including specific ingredients, are closely monitored by (l to r) Ronnie Pruitt, Tom Jones and Dr. Travis McCarty.

"Information is power" is also the driver behind the feedyard's heifer development program. Information gleaned from people and technology influences management decisions every step of the way.

Before any heifers ever arrive at the feedyard for the development program, two-way communication between the feedyard and the customer commences. The communication is to ensure herd health, nutrition and genetic needs are met. Jones added that success of a breeding program is dependent on each one of these aspects.

"Some cowmen have a health program in place while others want some advice," said Travis McCarty, DVM, Ashland Veterinary Center Inc., and heifer development veterinarian for Hy Plains Feedyard. "We provide customers with on-farm, pre- and post-weaning health protocols if they want to know how to best manage their heifers before they arrive at the yards.

"We also ensure each animal has pre-breeding vaccinations and are negative for PI-BVD before entering the breeding process."

When heifers arrive at the feedyard, they are run through the chutes, processed and sorted. The goal isn't "put as many through the chute as you can in an hour." Instead, the emphasis is on TLC - tender loving care.

"You have to treat each heifer with kid gloves," Jones states. "Our cattle are worked slow and easy. After all, you're programming that animal regarding her interactions with people and working facilities.

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"Low-stress handling has numerous benefits throughout the lifetime of that animal. We benefit at the feedyard because the heifer is easier to work the next time. Our customers benefit because research shows that calmer animals perform better – and we're talking cows and not just calves in the feedlot."

Florida research agrees with Jones. Florida researchers investigating reproductive performance in pasture-mated cows based on a combined docility score found the calmer the animal, the higher the reproductive performance. Dr. David Kirkpatrick, University of Tennessee, pointed out that research also indicates that a poor disposition can have a negative impact on several economic traits, including delay in estrus onset, decreased milk production and poorer health status.

Heifers arriving at Hy Plains enter the feedyard's state-of-the-art work area that features animal-friendly alleyways and chutes where technology abounds. As a heifer enters the next-to-the-last chute, three data points are collected using Cattle Classification and Sorting System™, a science-based system that weighs the heifer and measures her hip height and distance between the hooks to the pins. Hy Plains personnel then use this quantitative information to sort the heifers into like-sized groups – those with similar frame.

"Today's technological advances mean we no longer rely on a person's observation – which is subjective," Jones explained. "Decisions are made based on objective data."



With a heifer in the chute, long-term employee Scott Tucker reads information on three data points provided by the feedyard's Cattle Classification and Sorting System.™ The three data-point information – the heifer's weight, hip height and distance between the hooks to the pins – will be transferred to the heifer's computerized permanent records.



Travis McCarty, DVM, pregnancy checks a heifer. Her days pregnant will determine what group she will be sorted into.

"The technology we have in place can help predict mature cow size. It allows us to divide heifers into like groups so each group's specific nutritional needs can be addressed."

After the heifers are sorted, they are in a gaining posture, targeting a gain of 1.5 pounds per day. The preference is for a heifer to be a body condition 4.5 or so.

"Even if heifers are gaining just a pound a day, they are cycling," Jones underscored.

Approximately 45 days before the heifers are bred, a target weight is established. This target weight is determined by what the customer wants his or her mature cow size to be and the heifer's current weight.

"We want the heifer to maintain weight while receiving the necessary energy to grow and reproduce," Jones said. "It's a balance of optimal breeding weight and body condition – heifers cannot be given too much feed or too little feed."

"When growing heifers, you can say that we are very measured and particular about our rations. Heifers are looked at daily and their rations are adjusted as needed. By breeding time, they are on our top-grower ration. During AI, the ration will include more cornstalks so expression of heat will be better."

"Micro-nutrients are also an extremely important part of the ration."

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Heifers are bred at 14 to 15 months of age. Depending on what customers want, heifers might be time bred AI'ed one heat cycle or two, then a cleanup bull used; AI'ed one or two heat cycles without timed breeding, followed by a cleanup bull; or bred naturally the first time.

If a customer goes the AI route, then Hy Plains Feedyard personnel offers to assist with service sire selection. The goal is to mate the heifer to a sire that excels in traits where she could use improvement.

If a customer prefers natural service, the customer provides the bull or bulls.

"Red Angus service sires are popular," Jones said. "We're seeing a number of calves coming into the feedyard for feeding out or finishing that are enrolled in the Red Angus Feeder Calf Certification Program."

About 70 to 75 days after being bred, heifers are pregnancy checked – using either ultrasound or rectal palpation – and sorted into calving windows of 30 days. Protein in rations is kept in check to avoid fetal losses.

"We are focused daily on not only getting heifers bred but



Technology reigns at Hy Plains Feedyard, and that includes using a needleless vaccination tool.

keeping them bred," McCarty stated. "In addition to tending to the wellbeing of the heifers, we're programming that fetus.

"We are setting both the heifer and her calf up for success."

Jones added that the difference between developing a heifer to become a "super cow" or your standard cow boils down to two factors: nutrition and management.

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