

Inside...

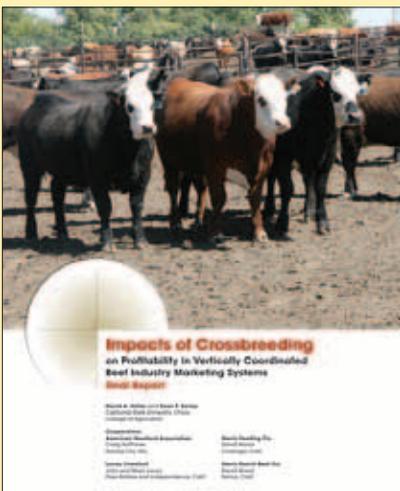


Forage section 18



Proving Efficiency 30

Ironman, Remetee
Top Louisville National
Hereford Show 46



Impacts of Crossbreeding
included with this issue

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Simply Value



PHOTO BY BECKY HARRELL

At Simplot an increasing number of baldie calves like this are born each year. All solid black cattle in the AI program are bred to Hereford bulls, and females with white markings are bred to Angus bulls.

When the J.R. Simplot Co. needed to add consistency and value to its cow herd, the choice was simple: Herefords.

by *Christy Couch Lee*

It's a company with a legacy of success. The multi-billion-dollar J.R. Simplot Co. strives to build quality into every aspect of its vertically integrated operation — from potato and vegetable products, to industrial products, to turf and nursery fertilizers, to the cattle that graze its ranches and are fed in its feedlots.

With two feedlots holding 220,000 head and 15 ranches totaling nearly 30,000 cows, Simplot ranks second in the top 10 cow-calf operations in the U.S., based on CattleFax data.

Always seeking new means of improving its product, Simplot began a process seven years ago to build

more consistency into its cow herd. Because ranches are on desert land, the cattle need a smaller frame, high fertility and docility to withstand the harsh conditions.

By incorporating Hereford genetics into its cow herd, Simplot has discovered great success in consistent quality genetics, highly marketable feeder cattle and a replacement female program benefiting cattlemen in the Western U.S.

How they began

The J.R. Simplot Co. was founded by J.R. "Jack" Simplot more than 70 years ago and today is one of the largest

privately held firms in the country with annual sales of about \$4.5 billion.

J.R. Simplot began his business as a potato farmer and established the cattle-feeding business four decades ago as a way to utilize large quantities of potato by-products generated by the company's food-processing plants.

Today Simplot is involved in virtually all aspects of beef production — raising cattle and feed crops, selling animal health products and grain storage facilities, and selling cattle products, which are raised in two feedyards and on 15 ranches in Idaho, Oregon, Utah and Nevada.

Bronc May is the Simplot custom cattle-feeding manager, responsible for customer service and assisting with risk management within the feedlot division.

Potato by-products from Simplot food-processing plants have always been an important part of the feedlot diet, May says. The majority of the feedlot stock is purchased from independent ranchers in the Western U.S. with Simplot ranches providing the remaining yearling calves.

"We sit in a very dry climate with an average of 6.9 inches of rain per year," May says. "Performance at our feedyard is the best in the country, and feeding potato by-products allows us to be competitive with our ration costs."

May says many ranchers feed their cattle through the Simplot feedlots year after year because of the success they've found through the Simplot risk management strategies.

"We have two packers that most of our cattle go to, with a third that also buys in this area," he says. "The formulas with each packer are a little different, but each will fit our different customers' needs."

Cattle for the climate

Most of the 2.5 million acres of Simplot ranchland is U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and private land that includes

continued on page 14...

trees, shrubs, meadows, desert and irrigated pastures.

"We had to design a cow herd that will take the desert climate and build feedyard performance into those calves," May says. "We have worked hard to get a consistent cow herd that will work and fit that rugged, desert area."

Steve Scribner, Simplot land and livestock manager, agrees that it takes a special type of cow to survive and thrive in the desert.

"These cattle trail from winter range to summer range and back again," he says. "They live in the environment, and it's fairly harsh. Herefords add the ability to travel, and they provide a native animal that we can market."

The Hereford-Angus cross also provides value in foraging ability and in the production of a moderate-framed cow, Scribner says.

"You cannot run a big cow on the desert," he says. "Her nutritional needs are more than a desert can provide. But, you can make it work with a Hereford-Angus-based cross."

Dick Frederickson, DVM, has served as the Simplot ranch and feedlot staff veterinarian for 23 years. He says that in the past Simplot relied on purchasing replacements for its operation.

"But, we decided to get our cow herd to where we wanted to be, we needed to begin raising our own replacements," Frederickson says. "Seven years ago, we began a 10- to 15-year project to turn our cow herd completely over. Our goal was to maximize the efficiency of our cow herd with a moderate-framed, efficient, English-bred, crossbred cow herd. Ultimately, we strive to maximize efficiency, while producing a quality calf for the feedyard."

In order to achieve these cow herd goals, May says, artificial insemination (AI) was essential.

"The best way to reach our goals was to use the AI program and choose the bulls we want," he says.

Frederickson says Simplot searched the major U.S. semen companies for

the Hereford bull to meet their needs. They decided on Enhancer, housed at ABS Global Inc. (ABS). Of the 5,000 replacement heifers to be bred via AI each spring, all solid-colored heifers are bred to this bull.

In the Simplot breeding program, all black cattle are bred to Hereford, and females with white markings are bred back to Angus bulls. Charolais bulls are also used on terminal cows.

"Now, we're down to breeding 3,500 females each spring," Frederickson says. "We're discovering we don't need as many replacements as we did five or six years ago. When we started this program, about 10% of females were baldies, and 90% were solid color, either Angus- or Red Angus-based. But, this past spring, we had 40% baldies in our replacement female herd."

Sam Shaw, Caldwell, Idaho, works as an ABS independent representative. He says the quality of Simplot replacement heifers has continually improved through this AI program.

"The quality of replacement heifers being kept on the ranches has improved dramatically," Shaw says. "This is the right progression for their ranch, and the next step for increased quality in their cattle."

Simplot has also taken steps to help Western cattlemen improve the quality of their replacement heifer herds.

The Sagebrush program

Utilizing the experience gained in the Simplot AI program, the Sagebrush Heifer Development program was created in conjunction with ABS.

Through this program, 1,500-3,000 heifers are developed for Western cattlemen yearly. The producer selects the bull and the AI program of his choice, based on recommendations from the Simplot staff, May says.

"Many ranchers don't have the time to really develop their heifers, and we do an expert job," he says. "We get them growing and cycling with the right minerals and vitamins. And, we've been very successful in



PHOTOS COURTESY OF J.R. SIMPLOT CO.

Simplot developed the Sagebrush Heifer Development program in conjunction with ABS Global Inc. Through this program, 1,500-3,000 heifers are developed for Western cattlemen yearly.

getting heifers bred for the first time. When you get a female started right and bred to have an early calf, she starts making money."

Shaw says his family's operation, Shaw Cattle Co., Caldwell, Idaho, utilizes the Sagebrush program every year.

"Per head, the price is cheaper than what we can do," Shaw says. "It's economical for us, and it's nice to have a place for those heifers to go."

The pregnancy rate with the Sagebrush program has been high, May says. The overall pregnancy success rate is 60-63%. And, with the CIDR® program, the 10-day pregnancy rate averages 68%, he says.

The whiteface advantage

Without question, May says, Hereford genetics have added value to the Simplot program.

With heterosis, black baldie calves will grade and perform well in the feedyard and packing plant, May says.

"It's hard to beat that Hereford-Angus cross animal, as it brings a premium to the packer," he says. "They feed well and grow well. And, there are many premiums out there for choice and high choice animals."

The value is also evident in the replacement female herd.

An F1 Hereford-based cross adds hybrid vigor to replacement females, May says. That hybrid vigor translates to increased performance, and the cows being easy keepers and a smaller frame size.

In addition, Hereford genetics can bring longevity to a cow herd, May says.

"When you look at depreciation in your cow herd, if you can keep a cow until she's 8 or 10 years old, that results in a lot of revenue for that ranch," May says. "The Hereford has some longevity to her."

Docity is another advantage that Herefords bring to the table, he says.

"That is one of the reasons they feed well in feedyards," May says. "They're not a high-strung type of animal, and they don't have a lot of jitteriness. That helps with performance."

This docility is also a benefit on the range, Scribner says.

"Herefords tend to be a stable, docile breed," he says. "We work outside, and many of our facilities are portable panels moved into the desert once a year. We wouldn't do well with wild animals."

May adds that black baldie females also add versatility to a marketing program.

"The black baldie is a superior cow," May says. "You can breed her to almost any bull you want. And, when you have a consistent cow herd, you can go any direction the market dictates you go. Right now in the feedyards, the black baldies may not bring the biggest premium, but they're the easiest to sell."

Frederickson agrees.

"If you're a commercial producer hoping to produce a better steer calf to sell, over the long term, you will increase the value and the production of your cow herd by utilizing crossbreeding and hybrid vigor," he says.

For this ranch, one of the largest cattle operations in the world, Hereford genetics have brought added value to an already quality cow herd — providing consistent quality genetics, highly marketable feeder cattle and a valuable replacement female program, all in the harsh conditions of the desert.

Yes, for the J.R. Simplot Co., consistent value has been found in the Hereford breed. **HW**



Simplot has discovered Hereford genetics provide consistency in the feedlot, resulting in added value and marketability for their feeder cattle.