

Going Above and Beyond

TLP is recognized for commitment to marketing Hereford feeder cattle.

by *Sara Gugelmeyer*



Darrell Ailshie is the general manager of TLP and has been an integral part of THMP's success.

For its commitment to increasing the value of Herefords through the Tennessee Hereford Marketing Program (THMP), Tennessee Livestock Producers (TLP) was honored with a Hereford Industry Innovator Award by the American Hereford Association (AHA). The award was presented to Darrell Ailshie, TLP general manager, Jan. 14 at the National Western Stock Show in Denver.

Since 1932 TLP has been the marketing affiliate of Tennessee

Farm Bureau. TLP owns three livestock markets with weekly cattle auctions and special feeder calf and cow sales. According to Ailshie, TLP is also the largest marketer of sheep and goats in the Southeast.

John Woolfolk, who is currently AHA vice president and also works for TLP's genetics division, explains that 13 years ago Hereford breeders were fed up with discounts at the sale barns and made the effort to launch a feeder calf marketing program but failed because no marketing agent was interested.

"In 1999 Darrell was approached with the idea, and as they say, 'the rest is history,'" Woolfolk says. "Darrell took a genuine interest in the idea of bringing Hereford calves together from over a large area to be marketed in large groups."

Facing obstacles

Through TLP, Ailshie and a group of cattlemen from the Tennessee Hereford Association (THA) and

the Tennessee Polled Hereford Association (TPHA), began the THMP sale because they saw a need for an organized marketing outlet for Hereford and Hereford-influenced calves.

The sale committee was not without challenges, though. Ailshie says, "There were a couple obstacles — being new, some people wanted to wait to see if it worked. We had to gain confidence and trust of people to make it work. People would always ask us, 'Why in the world are you trying to do that?' Because it just wasn't being done. And we had to overcome the folks that said, 'You can't do it that way.' They said, 'You can't tell me I have to give my calves those shots; you can't tell me I have to have my bull calves castrated.' The independents had to get past individual independence to collective independence."

It really was a collective effort, Woolfolk and Ailshie agree. "It was a combination of us applying marketing expertise and producers bringing contacts to the table and an animal health professional guiding us into workable health programs that would be accepted on a national basis," Ailshie says.

The first couple of years were small with about 200-300 head being sold through the program, compared to 1,000-plus in more recent years. "We sat in the office at the auction barn and sold the cattle," Ailshie says. "We never even went into the auction ring. We had a list of how big our groups were and the weights in each group, and beforehand we would get buyers

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— *Darrell Ailshie*



Ailshie (left) and Woolfolk have worked together with buyers and sellers to make THMP work.

on the telephone and buyers would go look at the cattle. Then we'd sit around the office and sell the cattle."

That's how the cattle were sold the first three years, and then, as the sale continued to grow, adjustments were made. "Every year we have added value over and above the market," Ailshie says. "To me that is what proves the sale, not the numbers, not the size; it's the fact that we've been adding value. And we have a lot of repeat buyers."

Part of the reason the buyers come back, Ailshie says, is that the sale committee has adjusted to what the buyers want. "We take a lot of suggestions and feedback from our buyers, try to follow up with the buyers after they leave and take recommendations from them. We pass it back to the committee and allow the committee to digest those, and feedback is incorporated into the protocol from the sale. It's amazing how buyers will react to your cattle when they see that you've reacted to a concern they had."

It's not easy

The hard work has paid off but continues every year. "It takes a lot of staff, but it takes a lot of hours by a limited number of people," Ailshie says. "Johnny (Woolfolk) puts in countless hours making sure that folks have all the health protocol information. He answers all the questions that producers have. Johnny has also done a tremendous job fielding the majority of questions and works real close with the producer side."

Woolfolk says, "During the sales, the hours that (Ailshie) puts in and his attention to details amazes me.

It's not unusual for him to be at the barn well past midnight and then back by daylight, making sure that every calf has feed and water and that every thing is ready for the next day."

Ailshie says he takes his job and commitment to buyers and sellers seriously. "We have worked to continue to improve

facilities, to manage those animals in a way so that when they leave our sale and get to the feedlot, they are fresh, they're healthy and they have a desirable look to them when they walk off the truck. We don't just kick them back there in a pen and wait for somebody to show up to pick them up. We spread them out, feed them hay and water them, do all the things that are necessary to keep those animals in top condition while they are in our care. And we work with buyers on the phones promoting the cattle, talking to feedyards, talking to order buyers; it's our job to make everybody aware that there is a quality product here and it's going to be available for a competitive bid."

The results

Although it may have been unpopular at first, this organization has made a difference. Woolfolk says, "When this program was started, it was not popular for a market operator to promote

Herefords. Darrell and I were teased and ridiculed about our plans, but 11 years later we are having the last laugh."

THMP's success has encouraged other state groups and marketing organizations to emulate THMP's success. Hereford feeder calf sales have been popping up around the country with similar success, thanks, in part, to Tennessee's paving the way. "In 2009 (the sale's 11th year), according to my unofficial figures, Hereford breeders from at least 16 states marketed over 3,000 calves through sales that are a direct result of the marketing efforts begun ten years ago through a partnership between TLP, THA and TPHA," Woolfolk says. "The additional income to breeders participating in these four sales this year would easily exceed \$250,000 due to group marketing."

Ailshie says about accepting the award on behalf of TLP, "I feel like a turtle on a fence post; I'm up there where everybody can see, but somebody had to help me get up there. I am so excited to accept this recognition for our company, our state Hereford marketing committee and all those folks that have put in the time to make it work, because without them I'd still be in the dirt. I give all the credit to the cooperative spirit and effort and the get-it-done attitude of those folks that have worked hard for this over the years." **HW**



Hereford and Hereford-influenced calves are marketed at a premium in Tennessee thanks to the hard work of TLP.