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Hardy Herefords

When the going gets tough, cattlemen rely on Hereford genetics.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

To say 2011 was a tough year for cattle producers in the Southern Plains is a gross understatement. Record heat combined with no or very little precipitation literally baked the earth and shriveled any chance of forage or nonirrigated crop growth. It's in these situations that cattlemen must look long and hard at their cow herds, and for two New Mexico cattlemen, that means being thankful for Hereford genetics.

Although this past year has been particularly difficult, Louis James and Joe Clavel have Hereford cattle because they work in dry conditions — which are not uncommon in eastern New Mexico.

Beef Extension Specialist Manuel Encinias of New Mexico State University's Clayton Livestock Research Center explains that this horrific drought is regionalized but much of his area has been in a drought classification since 1999. "It's an arid region," Encinias says, and that, in part, is why many ranchers have chosen Hereford cattle. "The Hereford cow is a mainstay in the Southwest."

Always been Hereford

He adds as the nation's cow herd has become more "black," much heterosis can be gained with Hereford genetics, and he's seen some producers doing that with Hereford bulls. However, much of his region is made up of very traditional-minded

cattle producers, so, he says, "there's no going back to Hereford cattle; they've always been Hereford."

Louis James is one such producer. The James family has been in the ranching industry for many generations, and Louis says his father taught him the value of the Hereford cow. Near Nara Visa, James has a Hereford cow herd, and he breeds all but the heifers to Hereford bulls. Ownership is retained until harvest, although the calves are usually fed out at a commercial yard.

"It's known for being dry," James says of the area, but this is the first time ever he's had to buy hay to supplement in the pasture. Although he typically stocks a cow on anywhere from 40-50 acres, which he believes is light for the area, the drought has forced him to sell nearly 200 head.

"The first 50 to 75 were probably getting some age and had this and that wrong, but we wouldn't have normally sold them," James says. "So, it really cleaned the herd up a lot. But, the last 100 or so hurt a little bit."

"It's hard to beat a Hereford under our range conditions. They get by on very little."

— Joe Clavel

In a similar situation is Joe Clavel, who along with his son Blair manages one of the Clavel Brothers' (named for Joe's father and uncle) ranches near Roy. The Clavels have been raising Hereford cattle since 1933 and continue to do so today.

Their commercial herd consists of Hereford and Hereford-Angus cross cows. They also have about 60 registered Herefords, from which they raise their own bulls. However, in recent years with increased demand for Hereford bulls, they've begun selling some range-ready 2-year-old bulls. The Clavels' Twin Creek ranch, which consists of about 30,000 acres, has the capacity to run about 1,000 cows. But, the drought has them down closer to 300, Joe says.

Tough times

"We haven't had a good year since 2004. Our cows haven't had any green grass to speak of in two years. We had little rain last year; we had no rain this year," Joe explains. "We used to run a cow to 30 acres, then we went to 50 acres, then a cow to 100 acres, and we're having a tough time doing that. We've had a lot of get-by years, but it's been a long time since we've had a really good year."

Despite tough weather conditions, both James and Clavel believe hardy Hereford genetics have helped keep them in business. "Our cows have

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOE CLAVEL



Clavels' cows haven't seen green grass in about two years.



Clavels' Hereford cows eat dry grass all winter, unless it's covered up with snow, with a little cake just before calving.

survived on little to no green grass," Clavel explains.

"What they have left now is the unpalatable grass. That's what they're eating now and doing fine. Those Hereford cows are pretty thrifty; they hold their weight well. A cow is a pretty amazing machine really to take dry grass and make energy out of it. Our cows take care of themselves and breed back, have a calf and do it year after year.

"It's hard to beat a Hereford under our range conditions. They get by on very little. We used to feed a lot when feed was cheap. We fed a lot, and maybe not all of it was necessary, but those days are over. We can't do that

anymore. We've got down to where we feed them a little during calving time, and if it gets covered up with snow, we feed, but other than that, they are going to have to get along on their own as long as they have something to eat."

Clavel admits he appreciates their Hereford-cross cows as well. "It's hard to beat a baldie mama. A baldie mama to me is a super cow. There is just not much bad you can say about a baldie cow. It has the best of both breeds."

In addition to efficiency, Herefords' fertility is important in these tough times. James says, "I think a Hereford will adapt to most any environment. It seems like a Hereford will come up with a calf and breed back as well or better than any other breed around."

In fact, James has been so confident in his Hereford cows' fertility and Hereford bulls' ability to go to work that this is the first year he's preg-checked. "This is the first year I even had enough concern on breeding to preg-check. We had a 95% breed back, which is pretty good, considering."

It takes two, as they say, and Clavel says he appreciates that Hereford bulls do their job. "The Hereford bulls scatter out and get the cows bred. The Angus bulls hang around and you have to scatter them."

The drought has forced the two ranchers to change their programs to make them work. Clavel said, "We haven't had any rain to speak of in two years. And our cows have held together well. We weaned our calves in late August to give the cows a chance to put a little weight on before winter, because I knew with the price of feed we weren't going to be able to

Cow exodus

Drought forces sale of a million head of cows in the Southern Plains.

When people think about the effects of drought, for the most part, they consider the cowman who must sell his cows to make it through. But what happens when all the cows go to town? There's hardly any need for bulls. That's the predicament John Dudley found himself in last summer.

Dudley Bros., Comanche, Texas, is an old-time horned Hereford establishment, as co-owner John Dudley puts it. For decades they've been selling top-quality Hereford bulls to commercial cattlemen in the Southern Plains. Annually in October, they sell about 150 2-year-old bulls.

But this year, as the drought dragged on and more and more cattlemen sold their cows, the Dudleys started

getting nervous. "At some point we had to say we are going to go ahead with our annual sale," Dudley says, "which happened to be our 50th annual sale."

The mass exodus of cows going to the packer, going north, just going anywhere else is devastating. New Mexico State University Clayton Livestock Research Center Beef Extension Specialist Manuel Encinias says that in New Mexico about 62,000 cows have left the state for greener pastures, either literally or metaphorically. In the entire Southern Plains region, that number has risen to a ghastly one million head.

Dudley says even though they decided to go ahead with their sale, the concern over whether they could get all their bulls sold continued. "I had countless, countless, countless communications with my commercial buyers who were, if not selling out, at least reducing the size of their cow herd in response to no grass, high-priced hay and, as much as anything, water resources. A lot of people, depending on where they ranch, are just running out of water. And that continues today; nothing's changed."

Trying to be innovative, the Dudleys decided to utilize Superior Livestock to broadcast the sale live on RFD-TV for the first time ever. And when October rolled around, it paid off. "We were trying to throw the net a little wider than our normal buying pool," Dudley says. "And that was very successful for us. We sold a lot of bulls through Superior, and we got a lot of good bidding through that. I think that made a big difference for us. Had we not done that, we would have had a very plain event."

As it was, Dudley says their average was off a little, but all the bulls sold. "I had a lot of producers that were

very polite and said, 'We'd sure like to be there, but we've sold down or sold out,'" Dudley explains. "And I had two or three calls that I thought I was going to cry, because they'd say, 'Well these two bulls we bought two years ago are so good, but we don't know what to do with them; we've sold all of our cows.'"

As far as keeping their own cows, Dudley says, "We're just hanging in as best we can, just like everybody else down here. From a seedstock point of view, you have this desire and need to hang on to your genetics and what you've been working on for decades and decades. It's kind of ugly, really. We're just very thankful we got by with our sale."

Still, with national sale averages climbing for Hereford bulls and Hereford females, it's hard not to get down. "Our average was off hundreds of dollars," Dudley says, "so it's pretty hard not to feel a little 'woe is me' when you realize how popular Herefords are now. We had this great set of bulls. Hereford bulls are bringing top dollar all over the Northwest and Upper Midwest. And you think 'darn, why was it that we had our 50th anniversary sale in the middle of this biblical drought.' But, that's the way it worked, and we got them all sold and had a decent average. It was just the best show we could do with what we were handed."

Encinias comments that when the drought breaks, and it will eventually, but it might not be this year, it's going to be difficult to replace so many cows that are just gone. The demand for Hereford genetics should be strong as cattlemen seek the type of cow that has been successful in the region for decades. **HW**



PHOTO COURTESY OF DUDLEY BROS.

It's a lot easier to raise and sell top quality bulls like these when everybody's knee deep in green grass. Unfortunately, this year, that was not the case.

feed much. I think they've gained 200 lb. since we weaned the calves off of them. We don't have any thin cows, and they're on grass only. We wait as long as we can to cull them. As long as the weather's not too cold, we won't feed them. They'll get along on their own."

Encinias reiterates that a Hereford or Hereford-cross cow is designed to maintain productivity in dry conditions. "When we talk about the drought, there are some type and kind of cattle that most likely will be able to sustain productivity. In the part of the world that we live in, they are going to be more moderate framed females that have moderate to low milk production and also are probably a crossbred mostly from the maternal breed side."

Blair Clavel, who also works as the county extension agent, says Herefords excel in traits that are difficult to measure but easy to see, like hardiness and doability.

The bright side

It's these qualities that, in part, have Hereford genetics in high demand. Although the Clavels have kept a registered herd to raise their own bulls, current conditions have provided a good market for selling Hereford bulls and females. Clavel says, "We've actually sold more bulls than we

need to because there has been such a tremendous market for Hereford bulls. There's also been a tremendous demand for Hereford heifers. We haven't kept any heifers for five years because of the drought and partly because there has been such a huge demand for them."

Blair Clavel adds, "We have actually thought about expanding a little on the purebred side if we have to sell more cows. We've had such good demand for bulls, particularly 2-year-old bulls. We are not seedstock producers by any means, but we sell some bulls that are range ready. They are not fed or pampered. They get around and cover the country. Everybody has gotten so 'black' in the industry they are looking for a little heterosis, and Hereford bulls do that."

If there is a silver lining to be found in all this mess, it's that the market has held together well. Joe Clavel says, "The good part of all this is the market. When you have to sell cows, the market's usually down, but we have a good market now."

No matter how much one focuses on the bright side, though, the truth is that this weather pattern is not supposed to turn around any time soon, and if it doesn't, something's got to give. Joe Clavel says, "When your grass is gone, you have two options, you either sell your cattle



Despite the drought, Joe Clavel says the Hereford bulls get out and go to work, while their Angus bulls have to be scattered.

or find pasture, or get out of the business. We're not ready to get out of the business, and it's tough to find pasture, so we're praying for a good spring. We've already culled the old cows, and if we can't keep what we've got left, it's going to be hard to stay in the business. You can fight lots of battles, but you can't fight Mother Nature."

Blair Clavel stresses that much of the Southwest is different from other parts of cow country. "It's different here than a lot of places. There's no corn stalks, hay meadows or irrigation. We rely on

what rain we get. It's grass only. We live and die by rainfall."

Encinias agrees, saying, "It can seem like a challenging environment to ranch, but every environment has its challenges. The old saying, 'If it was easy, everyone would be doing it,' holds true for ranching. The Southern Plains is good, resilient grass country, when it rains. It's managing the country that makes it a challenge. I am a believer that it does not matter what we try to do, Mother Nature is going to bat last." **HW**