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Answering with Hereford

Seeing an increase in demand for Hereford genetics, the Bennett family responds with what their customers want.

by Julie White

Providing “value added” genetics has kept Knoll Crest Farm, Red House, Va., in the seedstock cattle business for 70 years. Starting with polled Hereford cattle in the 1940s, the Bennett family has witnessed industry trends, the good and the bad, in a cross-section of breeds and strives to meet its customer’s demands. And today, what bull buyers are wanting is what Hereford genetics can offer.

Knoll Crest Farm began as a tobacco and commercial cattle operation when Paul Bennett’s grandfather, Paul D., and his brother purchased the Red House, Va., homeplace in 1929. The Bennetts are not new to the Hereford breed. Paul D. and Paul’s father, James, brought their first polled Hereford heifer to their herd in 1944.

Paul says Knoll Crest Farm has been collecting comprehensive performance data since 1963. “When our Hereford herd was at an all-time high in the early 1980s, we decided to add Gelbvieh cattle in the mix,” Paul explains. In 1990, when Angus cattle were introduced to the farm, the Bennetts began reducing their Hereford numbers. “It wasn’t necessarily a decrease in demand that we decided to do this, it was simply needing to create room for other breeds we were working with.”

Responding to demand

Today on 3,500 acres in the rolling hills of south-central Virginia, Knoll Crest markets Angus, Hereford and Gelbvieh bulls in addition to hybrid bulls, which are composites of the two or three breeds — black baldies, three-way crosses and Angus-Gelbvieh crosses. “The hybrid bull component from a bull marketing stand point has been very good to us,” Paul says. “We see that being pretty active moving into the future.”

The farm offers around 150 bulls in a December sale and another sale in the spring, selling between 100 and 120 bulls. Nearly 400 bulls a year are



Knoll Crest Farm strives to meet the cattleman’s desire for a problem-free herd. Paul Bennett believes the upward trend in demand for Hereford genetics comes from his customers recognizing the fundamental need to capture hybrid vigor and using a Hereford bull to do so.

marketed off the farm through private treaty with customers in more than 15 states. In the most recent December sale, Knoll Crest moved 70 Angus bulls, 40 Hereford bulls and 10 Gelbvieh bulls; the remainder were hybrids.

Paul and his brothers Brian and Jim, as well as his father, are the foundation of the operation today. Paul’s son Scott now works in Washington, D.C., but remains active in the family farm. Dalton, Paul’s nephew, works daily at Knoll Crest and also serves as the auctioneer.

Paul says they calve out 800 registered cows and utilize cooperator herds in order to market the number of bulls they do. “With a couple of folks we own the cows and run them on shares,” he says. The cooperator herds look different, and one has their genetics exclusively and generates hybrid bulls. Other cooperators generate their embryo transfer (ET) calves.

“Recently as we’ve gotten to a stable inventory or number of each of those breeds, and in effort to respond to

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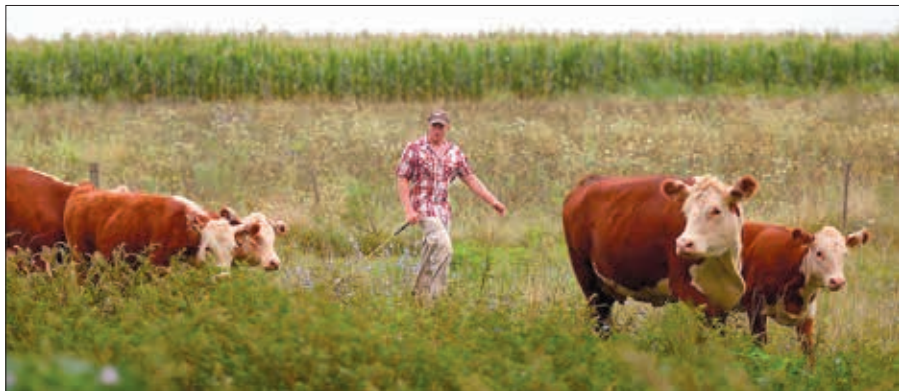


PHOTO BY AUTUMN PERRY/THE LYNCHBURG NEWS & ADVANCE

Knoll Crest calves out 800 registered cows and utilizes cooperator herds to market the number of bulls they do.

where we have anticipated demand going in the future we have felt like we most definitely needed to increase our Hereford numbers,” Paul says on the shift in their operation focus.

“For the last two to three years, essentially all of our ET resources have been dedicated to propagating Hereford cattle. So we are very much in a mode of increasing cow numbers on the Hereford side. We do believe the demand for our Hereford bulls has increased and we have no reason to believe it won’t continue to increase.”

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— Paul Bennett

The power of heterosis

Paul believes this trend in demand for Hereford genetics comes from his customers recognizing the fundamental need to capture hybrid vigor.

“We have a lot of customers that moved away from crossbreeding and developed predominately black cow herds,” he says. “We have found there is a big sector of that type of customer who has realized they need to be crossbreeding — to generate and create some crossbred black baldie females to replenish their herds with cattle that have improved fertility and stayability — just overall improved reproductive efficiency.”

Knoll Crest Farm’s bull customers are seeking to build herds that are more efficient, and Paul says Hereford bulls are fitting that demand. “It’s possible to generate the same number of pounds with fewer inputs,” he says. “The Hereford breed, generally speaking, is a good way to create more efficient cows. Those Hereford-influence females tend to require fewer inputs. Their fertility, disposition and

longevity are good, so our customers are expecting improved profitability.”

Bulls sold at Knoll Crest mostly sire replacement females; therefore, maternal traits are a selection priority in their operation.

“We recognize that a fairly high percent of bulls sold will be used on virgin heifers so birth weight and calving ease are extremely important,” he explains. “With that said, the average bull born here this year will be in the top 5% of their respective breeds for weaning and yearling weight EPDs (expected progeny differences).”

Paul doesn’t single-trait select and says performance and carcass merit are just as important. “I don’t want to sound like everything is very important, but really it is,” he says. The average Hereford bull marketed from their farm is in the top one-fifth of 1% for the Certified Hereford Beef Index (CHB\$). (Visit hereford.org/seedstock/profit-index for more information on CHB\$).

“We make a really concerted effort in selection for added marbling and added ribeye. It is very important to us along with moderating mature size. Irrespective of breed we look for high levels of weaning and yearling performance, but would be no more than breed average for mature weight and mature size.”

Wanting to improve disposition of their herd is another theme Paul recognizes in his customers and says Hereford once again fits that demand.

“Docility is important to our customers,” he says. “It’s pretty well recognized that the Hereford breed will improve disposition as quick as if not quicker than any other breed,” he says.

In addition, his customers are looking to improve lameness and chronic foot problems within their own operations. “The Hereford breed has been a nice way to address and correct foot structure problems that have existed in the herds of our customers.”

Providing to producers

Looking forward and considering beef industry trends, Paul says at Knoll

Crest they strive to meet cattlemen’s desire to have a problem-free herd.

“Different people will identify and quantify problem free in different ways,” he says. “We believe our customers want problem free and user friendly cattle. Our goal is to create cattle through the right genetics that are essentially free of problems. With that said, we are trying to create calving-ease cattle that will have high levels of early growth and will mature at a moderate size in effort to create efficient cows. We want to maximize end-product merit through marbling, yield grade and feedlot performance increasing profitability for feeders and packers as well as cow-calf producers.”

Paul says that to reach this goal, traits the Hereford breed offers like good disposition, soundness of structure, fertility and longevity are things that can affect the producer’s bottom line and can cause frustration if not present.

“For us comprehensive data collection is so important,” he adds. Each bull sold from Knoll Crest Farm has genomic-enhanced EPDs. “Our goal is to provide our customers with as much info as we possibly can to assist them in quantifying our cattle. We are very strong proponents of genomics and encouraging the American Hereford Association and breeders to do whatever it takes to facilitate the continued development of genomics for our breed.”

Knoll Crest Farm strives to provide excellent customer service. “This is paramount for us,” he says. “We take great pride in taking care of our customers. A lot of our bulls are purchased sight unseen, so it’s important for us to provide buyers, who trust us and depend on us, with best service and genetics we can.” **HW**



Dalton Bennett (left) auctioneers for Knoll Crest sales. Paul Bennett (right) sits on the block at the 2014 Total Performance Bull Sale.

A family farm

Knoll Crest Farm was established in 1929 by Paul D. Bennett and his wife, as a 290-acre tobacco and commercial cattle farm. In 1950, their son James attended Virginia Tech, but returned home during his freshman year to manage the farm after his father suffered heart problems.

In 1944, Paul D. and James purchased their first registered polled Hereford heifer. James and his wife Barbara raised five children, Beth, Paul, Jim, Brian and Jonathan. With interest from Paul, Jim and Brian to return to the farm, it was necessary that Knoll Crest diversify and expand. In 1981, Knoll Crest brought the first purebred Gelbvieh cattle to Virginia and in 1990, Angus were introduced.

Today, Paul, Brian and Jim operate Knoll Crest Farm, and at age 81, James is still active in the daily farm life. The three brothers each bring their own interests and skills to make Knoll Crest a successful operation. Paul focuses on breeding and marketing of their cattle. Brian manages the day-to-day office responsibilities including record keeping and accounting in addition to providing equipment maintenance. Jim oversees the cow herd management and production and purchasing of feed.

Jim’s son Dalton and Paul’s son Scott have taken an interest in the family business ensuring its continuation. Dalton is a 2013 graduate from Virginia Tech in soil and crop science and works on the farm daily. He is active in herd marketing and breeding as well as crop production. He also serves as auctioneer for Knoll Crest sales.

Scott is a 2012 agricultural economics and political science graduate of Virginia Tech. He lives in Washington, D.C., where he is the government affairs associate for the Keys Group, a lobbying firm that represents many meat-packing and animal health entities on Capitol Hill, but continues to take an active role in the family farm. **HW**



Brian and Jim Bennett (l to r) along with their brother Paul, operate Knoll Crest Farm.



PHOTO BY LAURA SIEGLE, VIRGINIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION