



Feeding Cattle Basics

How can cow-calf producers ensure their calf crop performs in the feedlot? This Wyoming feeder shares suggested strategies for a successful experience.

by Kindra Gordon

Sending weaned calves to the feedlot, whether for backgrounding or developing breeding stock, can be a stressful experience – for both calves and producers. That annual calf crop is a producer’s paycheck and investment in the future. As a producer and custom feeder, Marty Shepard understands both sides of the equation. Here he shares his experiences to help ensure a successful feedlot outcome.

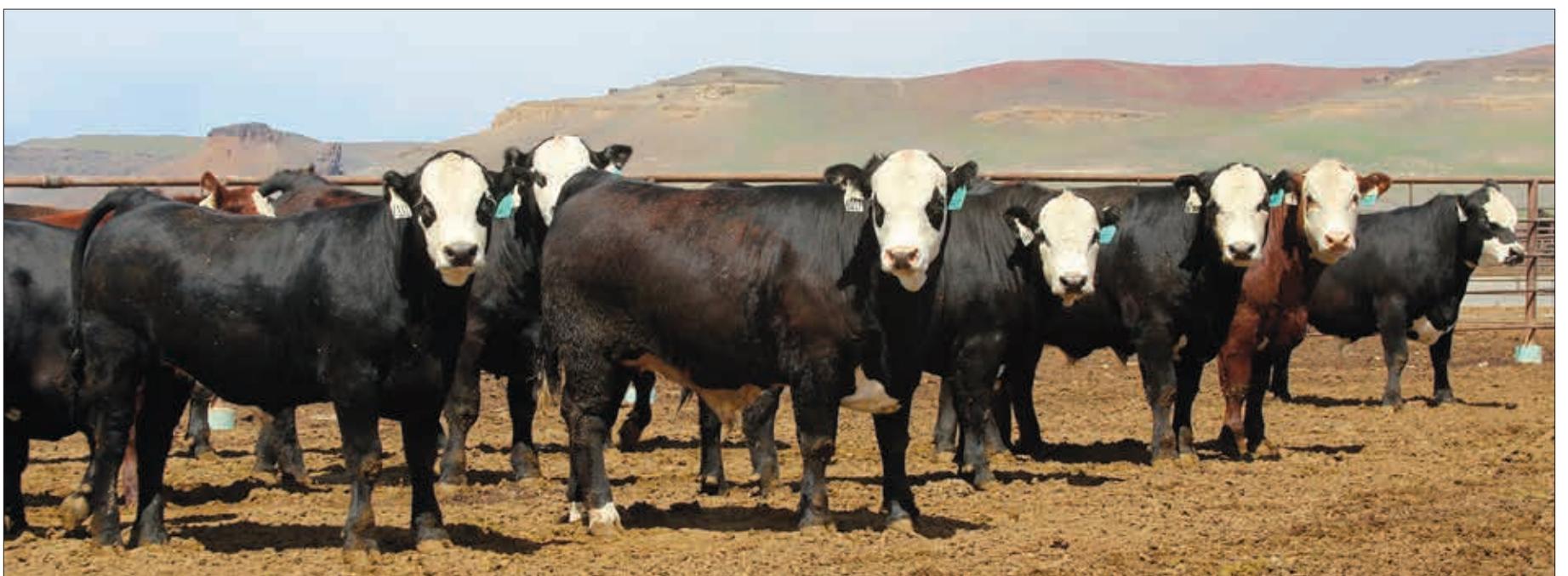
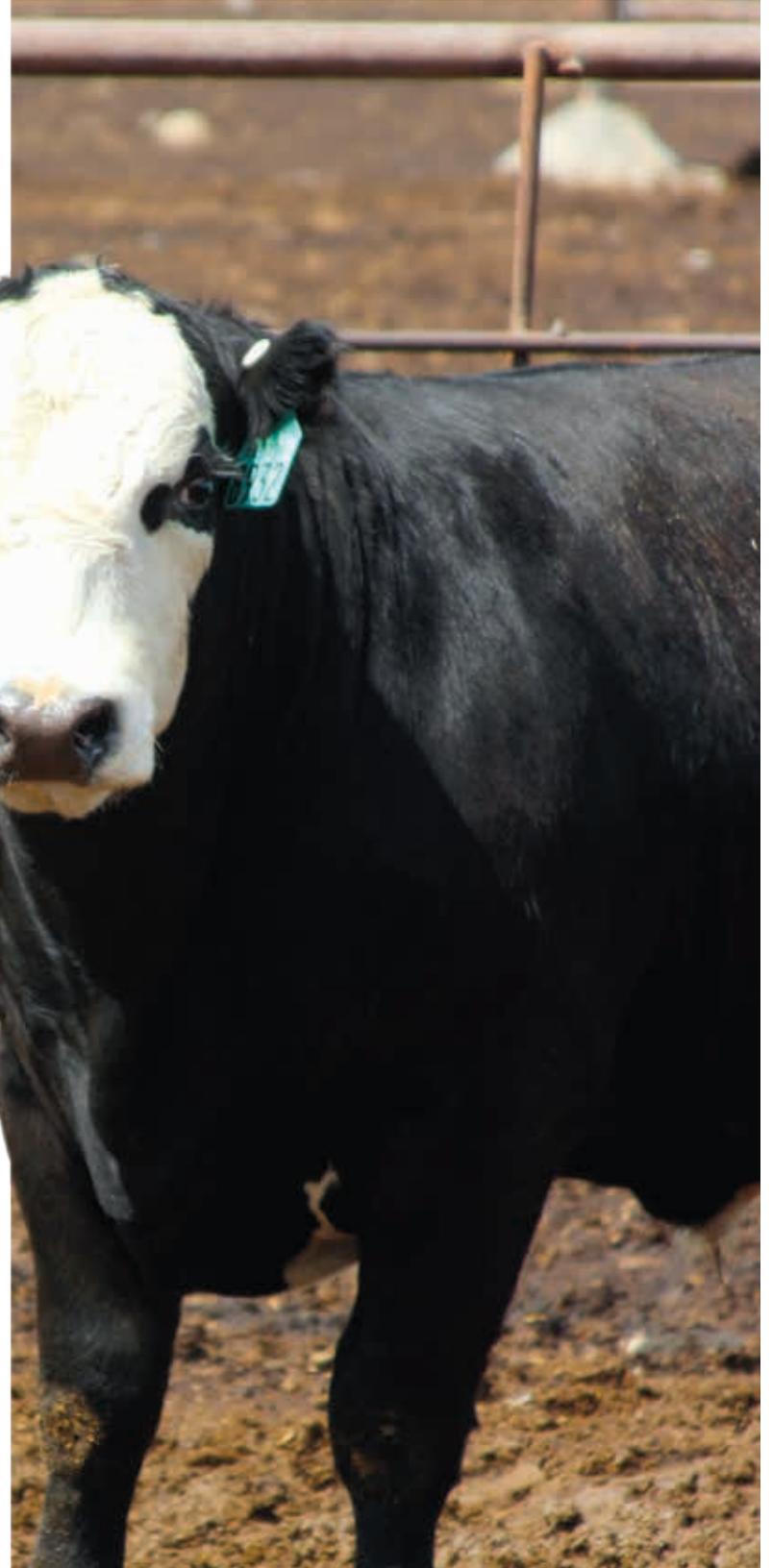
30-plus year history

Shepard founded 4S Cattle Company in Wheatland, Wyo., in 1978. Through various expansions over the years, the facility has

grown to accommodate 8,500 head, with a primary focus on heifer development. A typical year will include about 6,000 heifers and 500 bulls in the lot being developed and the balance being feeder calves. 4S Cattle Co. has the United States Department of Agriculture’s Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification and follows protocols for “all natural” programs.

The family operation includes his older sister, Debbie Shepard, who manages the bookkeeping and billing, as well as feeding duties as needed.

In addition to the livestock enterprise, Shepard also farms about 1,000 acres of corn and



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alfalfa and includes soybeans and beets as part of his crop rotation. Winter wheat is seeded to provide fall grazing, as well as erosion control. All farm ground is irrigated to supplement the annual precipitation of just 12 inches per year.

Shepard's focus is on accommodating the needs of his feedlot customers. He says, “We don't turn anyone away and we strive to go above and beyond what we need to do.”

He adds, “When a customer brings us their cattle, I do what they request.” To that end, Shepard emphasizes communication. He sits down with customers to formulate a plan for their cattle, which typically includes establishing the desired days on feed, average daily gain and the weight that the customer wants to target for the cattle — whether for a terminal market or breeding stock.

Shepard also maintains an open-door policy. He explains that customers are always welcome to stop in without calling ahead, and if customers decide they want to sell their cattle on the spur of the moment based on what the market is doing, they have the option to do so.

Shepard adds, “In ag, it's important to have a general plan, but I realize plans always get altered.”

Prior preparation

With regard to readying calves for the feedlot, Shepard is an advocate of preconditioning. He says, “In a perfect world, I'd love to receive calves that are weaned, preconditioned, and have the bawl out of them.”

Shepard explains that preconditioned calves perform the best. He emphasizes that preconditioning needs to truly mean “pre-” — as in giving vaccination shots to calves and then putting them back on the cow for 30 days prior to weaning.

By following this protocol, Shepard says that when preconditioned calves arrive at his feedlot, he has less than 10% that need to be pulled and treated for illness. He gives the example of 200 head that are properly

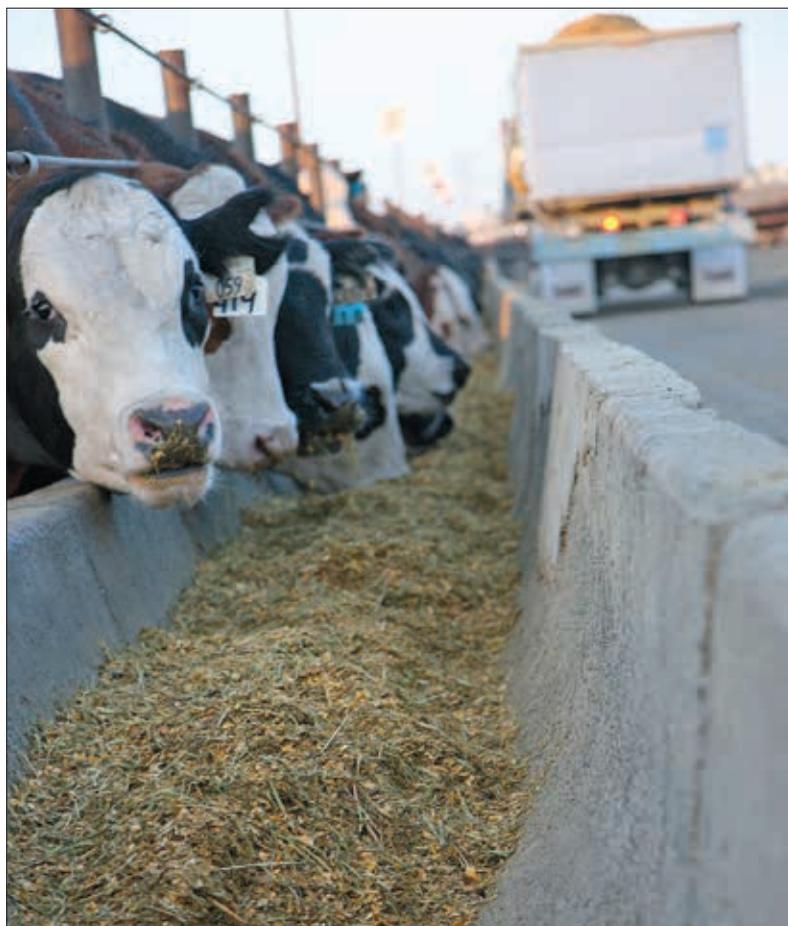
preconditioned; his crew may pull four head, compared to 20 or 40 head when the group is not preconditioned.

Shepard adds, “If calves are walking on the truck to go to the feedlot and that's when you are giving them a 5-way or 7-way vaccine, you may as well shoot it on the ground.” He explains that calves are experiencing so much stress at that time that the vaccine won't work as intended.

Additionally, Shepard notes that the immune system requires about 21 days to kick in; thus, administering vaccine when the calves will go back on cows and are under less stress allows for that immunity boost to develop.

“It's important to avoid peaks and valleys. Gradual is better, so that's why I advise preconditioning,” Shepard says.

That said, Shepard realizes it is not a perfect world and not all calves will be preconditioned. When calves arrive that have not been preconditioned, he says, “I like to allow 10 days to two weeks to get them on feed and lower their stress levels.”



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Shepard notes it is advantageous to administer vaccines when the calves will go back on cows and are under less stress allows for that immunity boost to develop.

To facilitate that process, he offers calves good feed and clean water immediately when they are unloaded — and he and his help keep a pitchfork handy.

He explains, “We will pitchfork feed out of the bunk and onto the ground to newly received calves for three days. We do this because their instinct is to eat off of the ground, not out of bunk. It's important to get them eating. My dad always said, ‘If they're not eating and they're not

drinking, they're gonna get sick.’ I'm old school; I learned a lot from my father.”

Another rule Shepard follows is feeding calves at the same time every day. “Cattle are schedule oriented. We feed at 7 a.m. every day including holidays. We feed 6,000 head in three hours and have two trucks. I believe feeding in a timely manner is important in every operation.”

Attention to details

Shepard also believes in good rations to fit the needs of each specific group of cattle. “All cattle are different, whether you are feeding English breeds compared to continental or feeding for terminal program versus breeding development,” he explains. “We build rations around the cattle and test the feed in the bunk every two weeks.”

Shepard works with two consulting nutritionists on ration development, and he is very hands-on with management, saying, “I'm often in one of our feed trucks so I can monitor the cattle.”

He and his crew also frequently weigh groups of cattle to measure how cattle are gaining and where they are in reaching the target weight goal the customer has established.

Throughout the feeding process, Shepard comes back to emphasizing communication. “The more information we can gather and share, the better we will be in producing an end product that the cattle owner and the industry wants,” he says. **HW**