

HEREFORD WORLD

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Promising Profit

The demand for its Hereford feeder cattle and its cow herd's good disposition have been the foundation of Sandrock Ranch's success.

by Julie Mais

Hereford roots run deep for commercial cattleman and Hereford breeder Kevin Bennett of Sandrock Ranch, Benton, Wis. For more than 70 years, his family has raised Herefords in southwest Wisconsin, where the Fever River winds through the gently rolling hills.

The Bennetts run a commercial herd of 300 purebred Herefords along with 130 registered Hereford cows and 30 black-hided commercial females.

While his family has farmed in Benton for more than 125 years, it was Kevin's grandmother who purchased registered Herefords in the late 1940s and got the Bennetts in the Hereford breed. "We've been in the Hereford business a long time," he says. "My grandmother wanted purebred Herefords for her commercial herd 70 years ago, and our family has been with this breed ever since."

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The Bennetts Aled 40 commercial heifers and 140 commercial cows last summer and are anticipating calving season to begin mid-February for the National Reference Sire Program.

He remembers, as a young teenager in the late 1960s, attending a beef symposium at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arlington Agricultural Research Station and hearing about the direction of the beef industry. “They were saying, ‘fellas, we’re going away from our little British breed cattle,’ and that’s when the whole beef industry changed,” he says. Kevin’s family stayed with the Hereford breed, and he witnessed the herd grow from 125 cows to the 460 they run today.

The ranch

A self-proclaimed, “die-hard Hereford man,” Kevin says it’s the Hereford breed’s disposition that has allowed his family to grow their program and enjoy continued success.

Kevin and his daughter, Stacy, manage Sandrock Ranch’s herd and row-crop and hay ground.

Sandrock Ranch’s herd consists of Line 1-influenced cows. Kevin purchases horned Hereford bulls for the breeding program and artificially inseminates (AI) approximately 80 head of heifers each year.

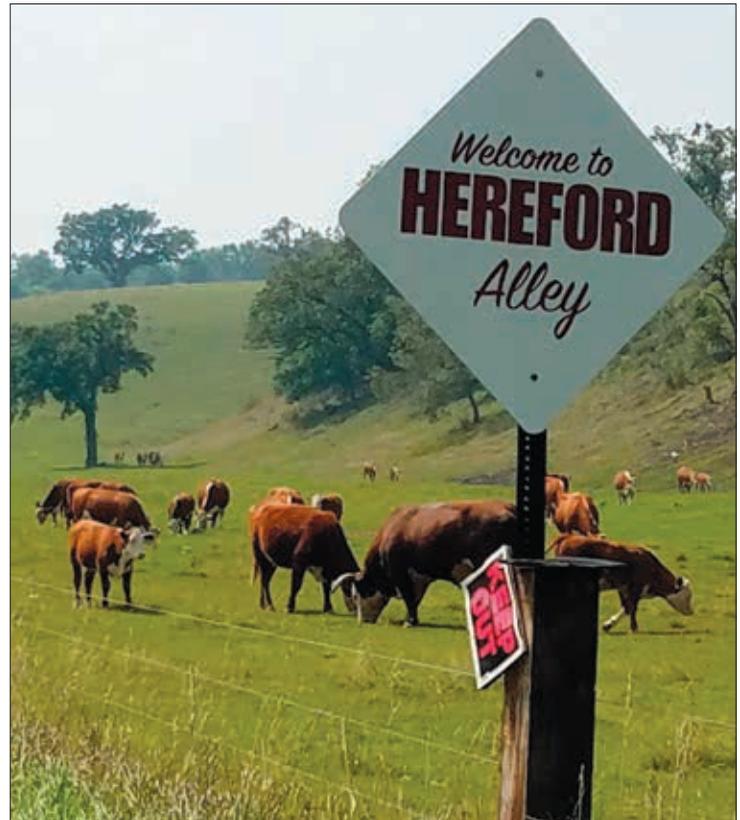
“We’ve been selling a few bulls private treaty, so we buy some polled genetics to satisfy that customer base in our area,” he says.

The Bennetts have 11 pastures for their more than 400 head of cows. The three largest pastures can handle 60 pairs, and the remainder hold approximately 25 pairs each. “Our pastures really work well with the number of bulls we have and the amount of cows a bull can handle,” he says. “This is a little more labor intensive, but that’s raising cattle in Wisconsin.”

Heifers are calved out in mid-February, and the cows begin calving in early March. Calving season at Sandrock Ranch is wrapped up by mid-May.



Kevin Bennett and his daughter Stacy own and operate Sandrock Hereford Ranch.



Herefords at Sandrock Ranch are marketed based upon their end carcass merit.

The operation focuses on carcass quality — calves are weaned in groups of 70 every two weeks starting around Labor Day and are sent to their feedlot to be finished. Fat cattle are then marketed and shipped the following summer.

Kevin says they retain heifers for replacements and sell some females, as well. “There’s a market for commercial Hereford heifers,” he says. “We’re getting people calling us wanting some nice straight Hereford commercial heifers. A lot of those producers have majority black cattle, and they want to buy some Herefords.”

Kevin’s customers are interested in Hereford’s good disposition and breeding the black baldie cow. “We have people wanting to buy bred Hereford heifers, and we have no trouble getting rid of black baldie females,” he adds. “They make tremendous cows — they milk good and have a great disposition.”

Carcass-focused

With the end product in mind, Kevin utilizes expected progeny differences (EPDs) for selecting their 20-22 herd bulls for the ranch. “I focus on the marbling EPD,” he says, “The bull obviously has to be functional and look the part, but I’m a numbers guy and the numbers have to be there.” And, he adds, what he pays for a bull reflects on the animal’s EPD profile.

After the calves are fed out, Kevin sells groups to Greater Omaha Packing Co. Inc. for a program in which carcasses enter the European market. “Our cattle have been grading very well,” he says. “When we first got into the program, the lead buyer told me he typically doesn’t buy Hereford cattle because they don’t grade, but ours work for them.”

Kevin’s focus on carcass traits has paid off — a couple of their semitrailer loads of cattle in the past few years have graded 100% Choice, with the average being 85-95% Choice. “Our Herefords have good marbling and perform well on the carcass end,” he says.

NRSP test herd

In 2017, Sandrock Ranch became a National Reference Sire Program (NRSP) test herd. Focusing on carcass traits, Kevin and Stacy selected bulls from the NRSP program. “We, in the Hereford breed, need to continue to focus on getting our cattle to grade,” he says. “With better genetics, we can get cattle well-above breed average in marbling.”

The Bennetts Aled 40 commercial heifers and 140 commercial cows last summer and are anticipating calving season to begin mid-February.

“I believe in taking what you have and making it better,” Kevin says. “We’ve been steadfast in improving and growing our herd by buying better bulls, and Hereford’s disposition has allowed us to stay with the breed. Herefords have been good to us.” **HW**