

# Hybrid Vigor Hard at Work

Hereford genetics overcome drought conditions in the Texas Panhandle.

by Ariana Bigham



Hereford-by-Red-Angus-crossbred females' milk and mothering ability allow them to consistently wean heavier calves for Texas cattleman, Wayne Wilhelm.

In mid-December, patches of snow pattern the flat grasslands outside of Tulia, Texas. Farm dogs Bentley and Ozzie look out across the field as a characteristic West Texas dust trail follows the pickup down a county road. In striking contrast to the rest of the dry landscape, the wheat pasture is green and luscious for the grazing cow-calf pairs. These Hereford-by-Red-Angus-cross heifers sparked Wayne Wilhelm's interest in the advantages of a crossbreeding system, and his program has only grown from there.

## From crops to cattle

Raised in a farming family in Nazareth, Texas, Wilhelm did not grow up rearing cattle. After attending trade school, he returned to West Texas to farm, although his dad wanted all 10 kids to take their own paths. Wilhelm explains, "It's in my blood. It's all I ever wanted to do."

After some rough years hit the family, he started farming from nothing. He began custom farming and occasionally ran stocker cattle on wheat pastures over the winter. At one point, Wilhelm ran as many as 4,000 head on winter wheat but did not focus on his own cattle business until after the drought of 2011. Nearly 10 years later, he has built a herd of 1,300 cows and 60 bulls. "I always



Hereford-influenced hybrid vigor provides increased productivity and longevity in Wilhelm's drought-pressured commercial cattle operation.

had a few cows, but I never thought I would get this big,” he says. He attributes this growth to red-hided genetics.

### From black to red

Wilhelm started with 100 Black Angus cows on 1,500 acres. When he became serious about the business, he bought cows from South Dakota and Montana. While researching on the internet, Wilhelm came across red baldy females from Olsen Ranches in Harrisburg, Neb. — and he was hooked.

“When I saw Olsen’s cattle, I knew that was the direction I wanted to go. I saw the potential and wanted the advantages of hybrid vigor in a crossbreeding system.” Since making the switch from black- to red-hided cattle, the cattleman has been sold on the immediate advantages of those red baldies.

The heifers have proven good mothers and good milkers with good disposition. “If you leave a gate open, you don’t have to worry about them running down the road because they don’t run; they walk,” Wilhelm laughs.

In a commercial setting, the first generation heifers from Hereford-by-Red-Angus matings bring the total package: cows with calving ease and calves with growth. Adding to this package, red-hided cows have a longevity of nine to 10 years in the herd, and Wilhelm cites a 25- to 30-pound advantage in weaning weights in their calves.

Wilhelm buys 100 bred heifers every year, specifically first-calf heifers to calve in September. Those calves are weaned mid-March, and cows are bred in June to get on a spring calving cycle. This results in two calf crops: 300 fall-born calves and 1,000 spring-born calves.

To continue the benefits of crossbreeding, Wilhelm breeds the red baldies to 30 Black Angus bulls and keeps 30 Hereford bulls to go on the black cows. Like most commercial operations in the Texas Panhandle, Wilhelm sells his calves at the local sale barn, which for him is the Tulia Livestock Auction.

### Thin water

Water is a scarce resource in the precarious Ogallala region. For Wilhelm, limited water has been a fun challenge to overcome. “It’s neat to see what you can accomplish, to see what you can do with just a little,” he says.

To combat the drought, Wilhelm has an intensive rotational grazing system. With 9,000 acres of his own land and another leased 5,000 acres, Wilhelm has roughly a 20-mile stretch where cattle can graze. Wilhelm capitalizes on Environmental Quality Incentives Program funding from the Natural Resource Conservation Service, which helps purchase cross fencing to create the grazing infrastructure.

In the unpredictable, drought-prone area, the benefits of crossbreeding are crucial to maximize the potential of rotational grazing. “I usually put the calves weighing 550 pounds on wheat. Wheat is a high-protein, high-energy grass so cattle gain well on it. ... We can get 3 to 3.5 pounds a day on winter wheat,” he explains. He adds, “Herefords do not get as heat-stressed as the black cattle.”

When spring calves are born in April and May, they weigh 850 pounds by the following February. “The industry has come a long way in producing low-birth-weight calves with high-growth-genetics,” Wilhelm praises.

### Building ground

In Wilhelm’s words, disconnected consumers are the biggest challenge cattle producers face. “There is a lot of misinformation out there, and people want to believe anything negative,” he says. “We need to get the message out there that we’re doing the best we can, and we’re treating the cattle right.”

Wilhelm and his wife, Melanie, who trains horses and is also involved in the industry, do their part to try to start the conversation with consumers. “My wife and I own a house in Costa Rica, and we always challenge our neighbors to visit the farm and see how we do things,” he shares.



Cattleman Wayne Wilhelm (pictured) aims to continue his crossbred program with a full set of red females in the future.

Although no one has taken up his offer, Wilhelm is not discouraged. He points out that his niece is in health and nutrition and that industry is promoting beef and the safety of genetically modified organisms.

Like many self-made men and the agriculture community before him, Wilhelm shows the outcome of hard work, determination and perseverance. Looking forward, Wilhelm hopes to continue prospering in the Texas Panhandle with a full set of red cows and reaping the advantages of a crossbred program. **HW**



Red-hided dams are docile and thrive in the unpredictable West Texas environment.