



## Replacement

# Heifer Options

Custom heifer development is a viable option for some commercial producers.

by **Bruce Derksen**

“It can reduce owners’ labor costs, put high quality genetics at their disposal with an artificial insemination (AI) program, and free up resources for cows actually generating revenue,” says Arturo Pacheco, owner of Pacheco Cattle Company in Alma, Kan. “In the right situation, it’s a win-win for everyone.”

He is referring to custom heifer development — sending selected heifers or replacement candidates to someone else to develop and breed.

Pacheco believes commercial cattlemen use his custom heifer development program for four main reasons.

“First, some operators don’t have the infrastructure to implement an intensive AI program,” he says. “Second, they don’t have the knowledge and just aren’t comfortable doing it.”

Some producers are unwilling to risk borrowing funds to expand buildings and handling systems to incorporate estrus synchronization or AI capabilities, Pacheco explains. At the same time, many believe they lack the time necessary to fully understand and use these reproductive strategies or to become skilled in selecting and transitioning heifer calves to provide a return on investment.

Feed availability and costs are the third reason producers look to Pacheco for his services. Especially in the Southwest, particularly Texas, he notes feedstuffs, such as protein supplements and corn, are often expensive. Pacheco credits his operation’s proximity to ethanol manufacturing plants with helping provide reasonably priced inputs of grass, forages and grain byproducts.

Most critically, Pacheco says producers utilizing custom heifer development see the opportunity to expand their limited land base for use by the established herd.

“If they send heifers off the ranch or farm it allows them to use the forage resources for a cow in production that’s returning revenue,” he says.

Often, Pacheco uses a double-stock grazing approach on Flint Hills grass. He turns out yearlings weighing approximately 650 pounds, at double the stocking rate from May 1 to Aug. 1, then rests grass the remainder of the growing season.

“Some landlords are content with that type of system, as they don’t want a bigger animal out on their pasture,” Pacheco says. “We try to make the most of the grass we have. If a landlord will let us run heifers or calves on it, we will, but that’s not always the case.”

Although landlord requirements dictate the number of cattle Pacheco runs during the summer, through the winter he normally takes in as many heifers as he can support with stockpiled forage. He provides hay and supplement based on forage quality. Depending on results of hay testing, he delivers targeted protein and energy-based supplements.

### Timing, breeding, services and costs

Pacheco usually begins breeding fall-calving heifers around Thanksgiving or early December. Timing varies for spring calvers, with calving date targets ranging from March through May.

Typically, Pacheco likes to have heifers at least 60 days prior to the breeding season so they get used to facilities and the way he handles cattle. Plus, it lends time to correct any nutritional deficits. If necessary, he accepts anything from a weaned calf to females 60 days from breeding. He is flexible and does whatever is needed to get heifers into breeding condition.

Heifers are weighed at receiving and hip heights are measured if requested. Disposition issues are addressed. Each heifer receives a breeding soundness examination. If asked, Pacheco is also open to providing clients with genomic testing.

Since he doesn’t use a drylot feeding system, Pacheco can’t

weigh and calculate exact feed use and efficiency data, but he monitors average daily gains and issues monthly reports with an invoice. Reports break down progress, outline any sickness or health concerns, treatment details and how disposition is improving.

For breeding, requested synchronization protocols are initiated, and all heifers are bred AI with semen of the customer’s choice.

For instance, a customer might choose one or two AI bulls, which are used to breed heifers at random as they come through the chute.

“Others ask us to pick something. For example, they want a Hereford bull. I will narrow it down and present information on potential sires and let them make the final decision,” Pacheco says.

Clients provide the cleanup bulls for their heifers. Previously, Pacheco leased bulls to match customer needs, but explains many seedstock producers hesitate to lease bulls.

Pacheco uses ultrasound to confirm heifer pregnancy. Customers choose whether open heifers go to the auction barn or are returned to them.

With his forage-based structure, Pacheco bills a rate per head per day, including all care, labor, feed and minerals. Costs are estimated on an as-fed basis. Separate add-on charges include semen, synchronization, breeding, pharmaceuticals, and any required veterinary visits and procedures. Pacheco covers the cost of pregnancy checking.

“We try to get the best bang for everyone’s buck in getting heifers developed,” Pacheco says. “Most will calve in the first 10 to 15 days, keeping the season from stringing out over the full 60-days.”



Likewise, Erin Kuck, of Key Cattle Development in Miller, Neb. explains commercial cow-calf producers use her services for multiple reasons including lack of space and shortage of appropriate feed on home ranches. The opportunity to AI with proven sires and ensure easy calving is also high on her customers’ priority list.

Each of these operations takes a different nutritional path to developing heifers.

### Pacheco Cattle Co.

Pacheco’s multi-breed development program primarily relies on pasture and forage, so he needs to match the size of heifer groups sent by clients with available grass and hay crops. He operates on leased ground and prefers grass where the landlord will allow him to run a bigger calf.

The potential is there to get them bred on the same day, condensing the calving window and reducing labor.

“If it fits in your program and is affordable to you, I think custom heifer development is a really wise decision.”

### Key Cattle Development

Most of the heifers clients bring to Key Cattle Development are homegrown, but a few are purchased females clients want backgrounded and bred. Some clients use genomic testing to help them determine which heifers to send for development, Kuck adds.

She likes to receive heifers 90 days pre-breeding to allow time to transition into the correct physical shape, complete branding if necessary, and plug any holes in the vaccination program. Her 100% drylot program handles approximately 1,300 commercial heifers in 23 pens.

Breeding normally consists of synchronization using melengestrol acetate (MGA), followed by heat detection and AI over two or three cycles to a maximum 60 days.

“Some operators know what they want and ship semen to us. Some ask our opinion, and we pick it out together. A few just let us choose,” Kuck explains. “We use different semen companies and focus on proven calving ease bulls and all-around, high-quality sires.”

No cleanup bulls are used. Pregnancy checking is done 30 to 45 days post breeding. The entire process takes roughly 180 to 200 days, although Kuck is flexible with meeting specific needs.

### Culling, Services Provided and Rates

Throughout the process Kuck monitors closely for docility and poor conformation, including feet and legs.

“We do pelvic measuring on most, and some get culled for inadequacies,” Kuck says. “We make recommendations and give our thoughts on culling, but we let the owners make the final choices.”

Culls either go to market or are fattened and sold later.

Feed data is accessible, but Kuck prefers clients to focus on body condition scores (BCS).

“I feel people get caught up in feed efficiency and conversion, and it doesn’t really pertain to what we’re trying to do,” Kuck explains. “We have all of the data, but what we look at most is BCS.”

Key Cattle Development costs are calculated on a per-day basis but are variable to many factors. Most fall in the range of \$2.20 to \$2.50 per day but are influenced by such aspects as inputs, number of times heifers are bred, feed consumption, overall heifer health status and any extra labor.

### Developing more than just heifers

While she develops heifers, Kuck stresses that a large part of her operation is based on developing relationships with her customers and clients.

“I like to think we here at Key Cattle Development handle heifers and owners,” she says. “Of course, the longer we work with somebody, the more we get to know what they like and what their herds consist of. Then, it starts to get easier. It takes years to establish.”

Pacheco says many customers are unable to implement AI to upgrade genetics or don’t have the required grassland to run a few heifers destined for their own herds. The entire objective of Pacheco Cattle Company focuses on the needs of the owners, he adds. **HW**



Arturo Pacheco, owner of Pacheco Cattle Company at Alma, Kan., says reasons clients send heifers to him for custom development and breeding include the chance to use AI sires, feed availability and utilizing more of their feed for the established cow herd.