Feeding the Data

Hereford Feedout Program results guide improvement.

*by **Katie Maupin Miller***

Cow-calf profitability stems from many factors, including consumer beef demand, which boils down to whether or not consumers are satisfied with their dining experience.

That's why Jon Averhoff, Texas Stardance Cattle LLC, Jonesboro, Texas, has fed his cattle at HRC Feed Yards LLC in Scott City, Kan., the last five years through the Hereford Feedout Program.

"If you're serious about becoming a cattleman, a rancher and a beef producer, you probably have a background on the ranch, and so you know the cow-calf operation, maybe the stocker operation, but when you go to that feedlot and go through that program and feed your own cattle out, you start to link together the cow-calf operator, stocker operator, feedlot and packer. Then the whole production system starts to make sense to you," Averhoff says. "You really need to understand that because if you're a cow-calf operator, you're producing the calf that's going to end up there. You need to be working on a calf that can be successful in the feedlot and make money going to the packer."

Averhoff's 225-head cattle operation is split between Hereford commercial and seedstock selected for carcass merit. Nearly every single bull calf born on his ranch is castrated — including his registered stock.

"Sending your own cattle into the Feedout Program, you're going to get your carcass data back, and you're going to know right away if you need to work on it, need to improve it or if it's where it ought to be," he says. "You can't get that data anywhere else."

The Hereford Feedout Program — open to Hereford breeders and commercial users of Hereford genetics — helps producers maximize profit potential by turning real-world performance into valuable information and marketing opportunities. Participants collect feedlot performance and carcass data that can help guide future breeding decisions and improve carcass expected progeny difference (EPD) accuracy. The program also provides opportunities to expand marketing avenues,

The data gleaned from retaining cattle through harvest allows cow-calf producers to make valuable improvements in their genetics.

including access to the U.S. Premium Beef® grid and the ability for eligible cattle to be marketed through the Certified Hereford Beef® brand.

Easing into retained ownership

"If you want to understand the value of your cattle and how to improve your genetics and management for those who buy and feed your cattle, you can make huge strides by entering cattle in this program," says Justin Miller, AHA director of commercial programs. "It's an opportunity to dip your toes in the water and gain a wealth of knowledge for limited financial exposure."

That's what Daniel Pike did when he sent about a dozen head to the Hereford Feedout Program for the first time last year. He learned about the opportunity through Breck Debnam of Innisfail Farms, where Pike sources his Hereford sires to run with his 325-head commercial cow operation in Georgia.

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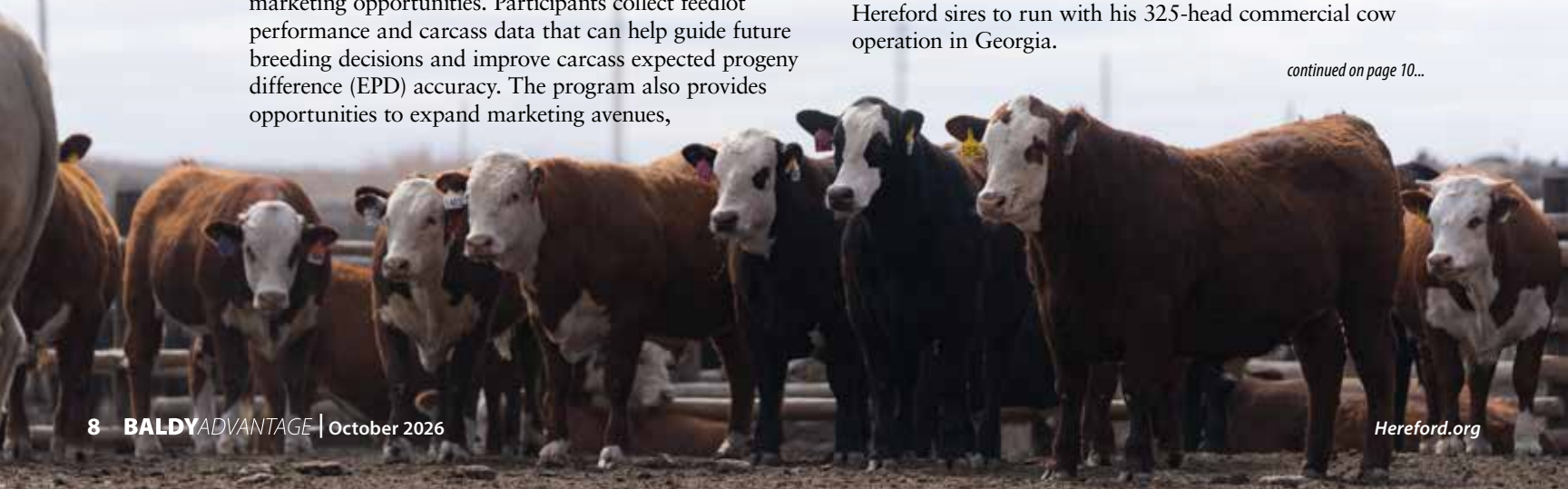

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- **Cost Cutter is out of EFBEEF N014 Phreda W489, pictured this spring as a 16-year-old raising her next good one.**
- **Maternal grandsire is the indomitable EF K334 Crown Beef N014, who was an early find in feed efficiency testing and also provides great carcass value.**

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"We started with a small number last year, kind of dipped our toe in the water a little bit to see what that was like, and then we sent quite a few more this year," Pike says. His goal is to put together a truckload or two to send in the future.

"I've had interest over time in doing some retained ownership on my own, but I never was quite confident enough in the genetics that I had to send a full load at a time," Pike explains. "This was kind of a perfect opportunity to sort of feel that part of it out, as well as select better genetics for our program with that feedback — having that data to analyze and work from."

Pike had been apprehensive that feeders wouldn't want to work with producers sending in smaller numbers of cattle but felt welcomed and valued by the crew at HRC. "Everybody's very helpful and professional," Pike says. "From the financial and the billing, the whole deal, I think it reinforced that, 'Hey, this is a process that's doable.'"

After harvest, his participation in the program ended up being profitable and invaluable in terms of gathering feedback on his herd's genetic potential.

"With this group, despite being a really strong market on the feeder calf side, it still penciled out," Pike says. "It's a win-win, where we have somewhat of a financial advantage, while being able to get the data to start making decisions based on data and not speculation."

Data-backed decisions

"I think it's really easy to tell ourselves that we're doing things the right way. When we have some objective measurements and objective data to validate or disprove what we're doing, I think it takes a little gall and self-reflection to be able to look at that holistically, but it keeps us honest as producers," Pike says. "It makes sure we're making the right decisions for our industry and our operations to produce a better-quality product."

While his data set was admittedly smaller with the dozen head he first entered in the program, Pike still put it to work immediately.

"I culled one cow, in particular, because I thought she would produce better than what she did and decided not to keep her after the results of that harvest. A couple others also surprised me," Pike says. "It's valuable to look at the genetic lines within my herd and make some different breeding decisions based on that."

Overall, Pike gleaned the most useful information from the middle-performing cattle as the true benchmark for his operation, rather than the outliers at either end of the performance spectrum.

"The ones in the middle are the ones where I probably learned a little bit more about what I had," Pike says. "I want to prove that we're producing the product that we think we're producing. To be able to look at that data and say, 'Yeah, we're doing what we need to be,' or, 'We're working in the direction,' is invaluable."

With both a commercial and a Hereford seedstock operation, Averhoff's use of the data is two-fold. He gains valuable insights about his commercial cattle's performance in the feedlot, while also testing the merit of his seedstock genetics.

Texas Stardance Cattle LLC is built around raising Hereford cattle that will produce 100% USDA Prime beef, which is relected by the selection decisions they make each day.

"We have a cutoff on our carcass traits. If an animal does not meet those carcass traits, we don't look at them," Averhoff says. "We end up with a group of animals that have the carcass traits we need, and then we start looking at all the other EPDs — keeping birth weight in line, docility, fertility, udders, teats — those types of things to keep them functional; they have to be functional."

"The calves that we send to the Feedout Program in Kansas always come back with tremendously good carcass quality grades, and that's really where the premium is paid at the feedlot — for quality grade," Averhoff says. While he isn't quite producing 100% Prime yet, Averhoff's cattle always grade in the upper two-thirds of Choice or Prime, and the data he receives from the Feedout help him continue toward his goal. This is due in part to being able to make selection decisions based on real-world carcass performance, but it's also due to the fact that this carcass data is folded into the AHA genetic evaluation, bolstering the accuracy of carcass performance predictors across the breed. Likewise, Averhoff notes the value of the National Reference Sire Program (see Proving Sires).

"All of our calves, even in the feedlot, have all been genotyped, so we can tie those back specifically to our bloodlines," Averhoff explains. "That data is just totally invaluable. You can make so much progress in carcass traits when you have slaughter data. Ultrasound is good and it's helpful, but the carcass data, I say, is like gold."

Ultimately, the AHA's partnership with HRC helps cattlemen make decisions.

"The Hereford Feedout Programs and the National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) Fed Steer Shootout allow AHA and NJHA members to receive a wealth of information about their cattle and the beef industry," Miller emphasizes. "They can make breeding decisions based on the feeding and carcass data they receive, improving their own operations in addition to the quality of beef our industry provides to consumers."

Consumer-focused cattlemen

This emphasis on the consumer and their experience with the beef they place on their plate is something that Pike and Averhoff share.

"There's a food chain in the beef industry … it starts with the consumer and works its way back through the packer, to the feedlot and on down," Averhoff says. "You know, really, who's on the bottom of the chain is a registered guy. The seedstock producer is at the bottom of the food chain. He gets his money from the cow-calf operator and that money can all be traced back to the consumer."

Pike explains that discovering the feedlot performance of his cattle, such as average daily gain and feed efficiency was telling. As a veterinarian, he also had a keen interest in their health throughout the feeding period. But he most values the carcass data. To him, the Feedout Program is about proving that his genetics produce beef consumers desire.

"Receiving all of the carcass traits, and the quality grades, too, tells me if we are producing the quality that we want to produce," Pike says. "That's probably been the most important."

Averhoff believes that understanding the complete production chain in the beef industry — from pasture to plate — is so invaluable that he has contributed to the NJHA to help provide opportunities for young people to feed their own cattle.

"We feel like the NJHA Fed Steer Shootout program really emphasizes the things that impact beef production, so that was one of the reasons that we really were fortunate and felt very good that we're given an opportunity to help sponsor the program," Averhoff says.

Whether a stockman is 8 years old or 80, the end product should be top-of-mind. The Hereford Feedout Program helps producers gain valuable insights to push their genetics toward better beef. **BA**

Editors' Note: Enrollment in the 2027 Hereford Feedout Program, which is open to groups of five head or more, closes Oct. 31. Delivery to HRC is slated for Dec. 12-16, 2026, although full-pen groups (50+ head) can be arranged to be sent to HRC Feed Yards at any time. Learn more about program requirements and how to enroll at: *Hereford.org/commercial/hereford-feedout-program/.*

Proving Sires

The National Reference Sire Program (NRSP) enables Hereford breeders and the collective breed to evaluate the genetic merit of young Hereford sires through large contemporary groups of their progeny head-to-head in commercial cow-calf production. Since its inception in 1999 the NRSP has also been the cornerstone for developing new selection tools, validating the efficacy of genomic tools and more.

"The accuracy of the predictions is so much more powerful when you have multiple sire progeny observations in large contemporary groups in a true progeny test like this one, compared to onetime snapshots collected in a performance bull test," explains Shane Bedwell, AHA director of breed improvement and chief operating officer.

All of this is possible in part due to AHA's NRSP test herd at Olsen Ranches, Harrisburg, Neb. Olsens raise progeny from multiple sires randomly mated to cows from birth through harvest collecting data along the way in large contemporary groups.

"The NRSP is such a well-run, well-managed program. The Olsens do a wonderful job. They track it from birth to slaughter," Averhoff says. "The data is good. You can't get that kind of data anywhere."

That data has flowed directly into the breed's genetic evaluation since 1999. Since then, the more than 300 NRSP sires influence 7% of the more than the 2 million AHA performance pedigrees, and the data gleaned from the test has not only bolstered EPDs accuracy but enabled the Association to study new traits like the current exploration of the heritability of methane emission in partnership with Colorado State University's Ag Next program.

Averhoff has proven his own sire in the program. Progeny from his bull, Stardance M9080 ET, a son of EFBeef BR Validated B413, dominated for quality grade. In one of deepest NRSP carcass tests, 86% of them graded Prime. M9080 ranks in the top 1% of the breed for MARB, and all of his indexes are in the top 1%.

To learn more about NRSP visit *Hereford.org/genetics/breed-improvement/nrsp/* or flip to Page 90 to see the list of this year's selected sires. **BA**

Jon Averhoff uses the data he receives from the Hereford Feedout Program to make decisions in both his commercial cow herd and on his Hereford seedstock operation that emphasizes carcass traits.