



# Reputation-driven

*VQA program rewards producers for going the extra mile.*

*Story & photos by*  
**BECKY MILLS, field editor**

For Virginia cattle producers, progressive marketing of quality cattle is hardly a new practice. Their graded feeder-calf system has been in place since 1959, and they were pioneers when their Tel-O-Auction system came to be in 1982. Still, it was a bold move when the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service and Virginia Cattlemen's Association (VCA) teamed up to offer the Virginia Quality Assured (VQA) program, a program that demands top management and genetic standards.

Risky or not, Russell County Extension Agent Scott Jessee was glad to see it.

"A lot of our producers were doing a really good job with health, genetics and nutrition. We wanted that effort recognized."

Phillip Bundy was, and is, one of those producers. After selling through the VCA Tel-O-Auctions since 1993, he was one of the first to market through the VQA sales. "It is even better," says the Lebanon producer. "We get load-lot prices.

We've had sales where we have gotten \$110 a head over other sales. It is unbelievable."

## **Simple process**

For Bundy, it was simply a case

of documenting what he was already doing. "Most people had to do things differently if they weren't already doing anything value-added," he says. "All I have to do is pop a VQA tag in their ear."

## **Angus is the breed of choice**

For Lebanon, Va., producers Philip Bundy and Zac Ketron, meeting the genetic requirements for the Virginia Quality Assured (VQA) marketing program is a no brainer. Both use quality Angus bulls, and in Ketron's case, Angus semen.

Bundy says, "We use Angus to get the black hide and have a premium seller. Red calves are a nickel back. We give the buyer the option to take them out."

The commercial producer usually buys performance-tested bulls from the Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) sale in Wytheville. Using Angus sires also makes his calves eligible for AngusSource®. He tags the VQA calves with the AngusSource tags, as well as the truckload lot he sells private treaty.

"I started it five or six years ago," says Bundy. "It has to help. The more people that are interested in your cattle, the better."

Ketron, who has around 40 purebred Angus and 160 Angus-cross females, tries to breed all of his females with one round of artificial insemination (AI). He also buys performance-tested Angus bulls to use for cleanup bulls.

"That's what brings the money," he states.

While he makes it sound simple, his program is textbook. When the calves from either his 113-cow fall-calving herd or the 190-cow spring-calving herd hit the ground, he ear-tags them, gives them a blackleg and pinkeye vaccination, and bands the bull calves. A few weeks before weaning, he gives them a modified-live virus (MLV) Bovi-Shield Gold vaccine for the respiratory diseases and deworms them. At weaning, in July for the fall-born calves and September and October for the spring-born calves, he revaccinates with Bovi-Shield Gold. Then, he preconditions both groups for at least 45 days.

His calves, which weigh around 575 pounds (lb.) at weaning, usually put on 150 lb. on Jump Start, a high-fiber, 14% protein feed from Southern States, as well as fescue, orchard grass, some bluegrass and clover pastures. In addition, they get free-choice orchard-grass hay.

"It is second-cutting hay," he says. "I try to give them my best."

Near sale time, the advantages of VQA marketing really shine. Virginia Department of Agriculture (VDA) graders Glen Wheeler, C.W. Pratt or Butch Foster, along with Scott Jessee,





Lebanon, Va., producer Phillip Bundy says the Virginia Quality Assured sales bring in extra money on preconditioned cattle.

come to his operation, grade his calves and estimate their weights so they can match them with other calves of similar grade, sex, weight and breed type to make a truckload lot.

“I’ve got to hand it to them,” says Bundy, “the buyers know the calves will be within 5 lb. of what they estimate.”

Jessee says combining the calves from different operations is one of the main advantages of the VQA program. “It allows smaller producers to get a price comparable to what larger producers get

when they sell in truckload lots.”

Bundy adds, “The graders do a really good job of keeping the quality in and knocking the bad ones out.”

Zac Ketron, another Lebanon producer, agrees. “It is amazing. They are good.”

Ketron says there are sometimes hard feelings when calves aren’t accepted. “The reason they fuss if their calves don’t make the sale is because VQA calves bring so much more money.”

*(Continued on page 60)*



Zac Ketron says Angus are what bring in the money in Virginia Quality Assured sales.

## VQA marketing program

Virginia Quality Assured (VQA) is a feeder-cattle marketing program that is used to identify and market feeder cattle that meet superior health and genetic requirements. The Gold Tag program focuses on superior health requirements, while the Purple Tag program takes into account both health and genetic considerations.

VQA Tags and accompanying requirements are shown below:

### Gold Tag

Health-program-assured

- Vaccinated for infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD, Type I & II), parainfluenza-3 virus (PI<sub>3</sub>), seven-strain clostridial and Pasteurella (Mannheimia with leukotoxoid). Modified-live IBR, BVD, PI<sub>3</sub> vaccine must be used at least once.
- Processing map and certification form to accompany the cattle.



### Gold Tag with ‘W’

Health-program-assured + weaned

All Gold Tag requirements plus:

- Calves weaned at least 45 days
- Trained for feed and water troughs



### Purple Tag

Genetic- and health-program-assured

All Gold Tag requirements plus:

- Breed of sire identified
- Sire must meet minimum yearling weight expected progeny differences (EPDs)
- Sire EPD minimums specified



### Purple Tag with ‘W’

Genetic- and health-program-assured + weaned

All Purple Tag requirements plus:

- Calves weaned at least 45 days
- Trained for feed and water troughs



### Program goals

1. Improve the health and genetics of Virginia feeder cattle.
2. Identify feeder cattle with superior health and/or genetic history to improve their marketability and reward producers for their efforts.
3. Improve the communication between buyers and sellers of feeder cattle.
4. Enhance the reputation of Virginia feeder cattle.

### General requirements

1. To qualify for VQA, feeder cattle must be certified by a third party, such as a veterinarian, extension agent, VQA personnel or someone who has been trained as a certifier.
2. Vaccinations are to be given according to label directions, except the initial dose of vaccines requiring a booster may be given at any time after 4 months of age, thus extending the period between the initial and booster injections.
3. All required vaccinations must be given after calves are 120 days old and at least 14 days before sale (booster should be given if required by label instructions).
4. Cattle producers must be Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) certified.
5. All vaccinations must be given in the neck area.
6. A processing map and verification form must accompany cattle.
7. Cattle must weigh a minimum of 400 pounds.
8. Heifers are guaranteed open.
9. Steers are castrated, healed and guaranteed against stags.
10. All calves are dehorned and healed.
11. Cattle are owned by the seller for at least 60 days.

**Reputation Driven** *(from page 59)***Adding value**

Once they are graded and accepted to the sale, the calves sell in a VQA sale, typically on a Monday night, through the VCA Tel-O-Auction system. VQA also partners with DV Auctions, so buyers can bid over the Internet if they prefer. The sales fee is \$22.50 per head.

Says Jessee, “This is very similar to the fees in the graded sales. It includes a \$3-per-head consignment and insurance fee, approved by the consignors, to be used to compensate producers and buyers if things don’t go exactly as planned.”

When it is time to ship the calves, producers take them to a central location

so they can be weighed and loaded.

Both Bundy and Ketron are pleased with their return on investment with VQA. Says Bundy, “It is mostly feed costs. They eat around 10 lb. per head per day, that’s \$90 or less.”

Ketron estimates he has \$50-\$60 more per calf invested for the preconditioning.

Apparently it is working well for the buyers, too. Jason Carter, VCA executive secretary, says, “Buyer feedback has been very good. We have had very few issues with sick or underperforming cattle. Our buyers become repeat customers.”

Butch Foster, who is a fieldman for VCA and manages a stocker operation with his father, Bob, says, “The VQA calves are trouble-free. If you treat them right, they’ll go right to work for you.”

He adds, “There isn’t a 25-pound difference between the calves in a load. I bought a load that was supposed to average 720 pounds a calf, and they weighed 718 pounds. I bought another load that was estimated to average 740 pounds, and they averaged 736 pounds.”

The word has spread.

Says Carter, “We market around 24,000 head a year through the VQA program. Since 1997, we’ve probably sold close to half a million head.”

In the VQA sales hosted by the Abingdon Feeder Cattle Association, Bundy, who is president of the association, says, “This year, I think we’ll cross 10,000 head over the scales. We’re pulling calves out of North Carolina and Tennessee.”

Jessee adds, “Since 2005, we’ve sold 500 tractor-trailer loads.”

The extension agent says the Abingdon group offers sales in January, March, July, August, November and December.

“This takes care of our fall calvers and spring calvers,” he says. “Plus, everybody has a few late calves. We try to accommodate those.”

**Partnering up**

If you’re interested in starting a similar marketing group, Jessee says, “Get a core group of good producers. More people will be willing to try when they see the core group is successful.”

VCA’s Carter agrees, “Start with producers who already utilize a consistent marketing plan, and let them demonstrate to others that consistency works.”

Jessee adds, “Be willing to partner with the state department of agriculture and the state cattlemen’s association.”

Bundy and Ketron say that top-notch extension agents are also key.

Phil Blevens in Washington County and Scott Jessee are the masterminds, says Bundy. “They’ll do anything you ask.”

Ketron agrees. “I would put Scott Jessee up against any extension agent. He goes the extra mile.”

Even with great extension agents, Carter says a successful program has to have that loyal group of producers.

“We have a core group who follow through year after year,” he notes. “This is not a program that is going to pay people to jump in and out. It is reputation-driven.”

