

Bourbon County Elite

A Kentucky program focuses on properly developing superior heifers that will demand top dollar on the market.

Story by
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Heifer development has rightly become a topic of more discussion, says Bourbon County, Ky., Extension agent Glenn Mackie. "It's important to do it right because it's an expensive process. There's a lot of time and money invested, and if you do it wrong, it can be very painful."

Mackie speaks from experience. Twenty years ago, he used artificial insemination (AI) to breed 50 heifers to a non-calving-ease sire after synchronizing them. Only 28 of the heifers conceived to their first service, and he pulled 26 of those 28 calves.

Through the Bourbon County Elite Heifer Program, Mackie is helping producers avoid that kind of disaster. Under the direction of the University of Kentucky Extension, the objective of the program is to help producers develop a superior set of heifers that will demand top dollar on the market.

In addition to providing an alternative marketing outlet, the program provides cattlemen a tremendous educational opportunity to work cooperatively toward applying the most up-to-date technologies in beef-replacement-heifer development, thus improving their own cattle management and the quality of the heifers they retain in their own herds. The screening and performance requirements are demanding, yet attainable.

Now an Extension facilitator for the program, Mackie originally got involved as one of the four producers consigning heifers to the first sale.

Transition

"We started the program to develop

heifers for an auction sale, and it evolved into much more," Mackie says, recalling when the local livestock improvement association started the program in 1991. "This program is now used by folks in this area to develop heifers to retain on their farms."

The original four consignors all are still involved in the program, but they've added several more to their ranks. Over the years, 38 producers have consigned cattle. At the fall 2000 sale, there were 16 consignors.

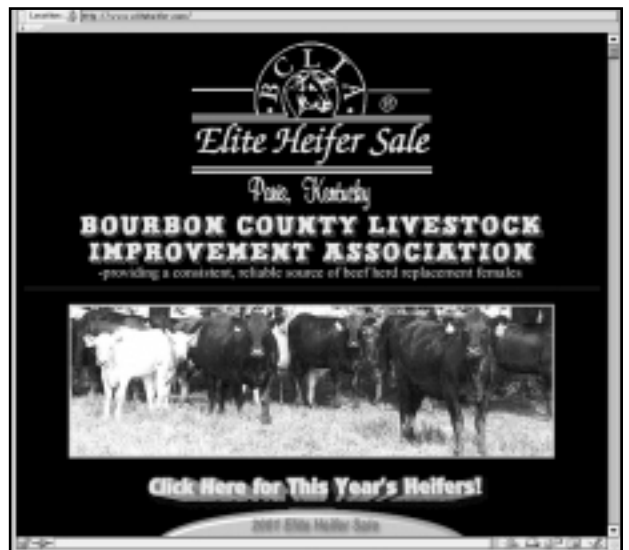
Most of those consignors come from Bourbon County, of which Paris is the county seat, Mackie says. "We're in bluegrass country — good pastureland with good forage."

Making use of that resource, most of the heifers are developed on forage. "We do some grain feeding," he admits. "In 1999 we were very dry and short on forages like hay and silage. We used more grain and grain byproducts, like corn gluten and soy hulls, than we normally do."

The program originally sold open heifers in a spring sale and bred heifers in the fall. "We're primarily spring calvers here," Mackie explains. "Calving season for cows starts March 1, and we try to calve the



In 1997 the Bourbon County Elite Heifer Program switched to only fall sales of pregnant heifers. "The primary reason for the change," says Glenn Mackie, Extension facilitator of the program, "was the difference in price between open heifers sold in the spring and bred heifers sold in the fall. This told us that people would rather buy them bred, in the fall."



A Web page (www.eliteheifer.com) provides up-to-date statistics — numbers of heifers sold, sale averages, etc. — and photos of heifers sold in past years and those to sell in the future.

heifers a little ahead of that, starting in mid-February."

The first sale offered 400 open heifers with an extensive health-management program, pelvic measurements and scored reproductive tracts.



Preconditioned-calf sales in the area offer a means by which to sell heifers' progeny. The cows pictured here, now with their second calves, were Elite heifers in the 1999 sale.



Bourbon County Cooperative Extension facilitates the program, does the paperwork and recordkeeping, and coordinates the screening and other aspects of the program.

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Marketing strategy

Now sales are conducted the first Monday in November. All the heifers are checked safe in calf, and they're guaranteed to remain pregnant for 30 days after the sale.

"We also offer free delivery, if you buy 10 head or more, for up to 500 miles. So we do deliveries into several neighboring states. We have sold heifers to 10 states in this area," Mackie says. Counting both the open and bred heifers, there have been more than 6,000 head sold through their auction sales since 1991.

A Web page (www.eliteheifer.com) provides up-to-date statistics — numbers of heifers sold, sale averages, etc. Photos of past sale lots and future offerings are also posted. "I photograph each consignor's heifers and give the name and phone number; if people are interested in any particular group, they can call that producer," he says.

The program has grown a lot in the past few years. "The last two years, we've had quite a number of heifers sell — more than what we can sell through the auction," Mackie says.

They've limited the auction to about 650 head of bred heifers, reasoning that's about what they can sell in a two- to three-hour period, which seems to be the optimum time for holding people at an evening auction, he says. "After a while they start to think about going home, especially if they've driven very far. So we start the sale at 6, and it's over by 9 p.m."

Heifers are grouped in lots with an average of five head and not more than 10 heifers in a group.

"We sold an additional 400 heifers last year (2000) after the auction; we had that many more qualified heifers," Mackie says. The additional heifers were sold off the farms by private treaty, on an individual basis. "We get a lot of calls from interested

people and can direct them to the producers."

Surveys of the buyers at different intervals provide feedback on how the heifers are performing for their new owners. Satisfaction has been high, and in 1999 and 2000, 45% of the heifers were purchased by repeat buyers.

"They are very satisfied, for instance, with the calving ease," Mackie says.

Up until the fall 2000 sale, there was not a significant difference in the prices received for heifers bred by natural service or by AI, he says. However, in the 2000 sale 163 head of AI-bred heifers brought \$75/head more than those bred by natural service.

Development strategies

There are specific guidelines for consigning heifers to the Bourbon County Elite Heifer Sale. They must be on the farm by Nov. 15 (raised or purchased), tagged with the program's ear tag after qualifying in the spring, dehorned and free of eye scars.

Heifers are screened on the farm at fall working by representatives from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. Health guidelines specify calthood vaccinations, a weaning vaccination program, deworming, treatment for external parasites and a prohibition on use of any growth implants. There are also guidelines for prebreeding requirements and examinations, bull selection, target weights, and health programs.

Mackie expects to screen about 2,400 heifers in the spring, shooting for 65% of their mature weight before breeding.

"We feel we've done a good job if we qualify 50% of them through our program," he explains. "About half will drop out either on weight, pelvic measurement, tract score, disposition or some physical problem." For example, several heifers will be disqualified each year because of pinkeye scars.

"We try to screen them pretty closely on disposition. All of us in the cow business know what it's like to handle one that's a bit unruly, so we try to screen those out," he says.

Several breeds are represented, but the heifers in the program are predominately black because of demand. Two-thirds of the heifers sold in fall 2000 were black, and 50% were Angus or Angus-cross. Basically all were bred to Angus sires. All of the heifers in the 2001 sale were bred to Angus bulls.

"We breed all of the heifers to calving-ease Angus bulls," Mackie explains, adding that the sires are required to have a birth weight expected progeny difference (EPD) less than +1.5. "A live calf is our main focus, but the bulls used in the program have a lot

better production records across the board than they did when we started in 1991.

"You get a lot more for your money today in a calving-ease bull," he continues. "Back then, you got calving ease, and that's all you got, but today more people are selecting for the whole package, and the performance of the calves has improved."

He says that, of the heifers screened in the spring, about half will be synchronized and bred by AI. "We'll synchronize them with MGA® and Lutalyse®, heat detect and breed, then use cleanup bulls." Though the breeding season for the entire group may span 90 days, heifers are packaged for the sale in groups that will calve within 45 days.

"We try to preg-check in the fall, when the heifers would be pregnant about 100 days from their AI date; they can be palpated more accurately at that stage," Mackie says. The ones bred by the cleanup bulls will be at least one cycle back at preg-check in early September.

"We may have a few heifers — five or six of 1,000 — that miscarry in the 30 days before the sale, but we guarantee the heifers

and will replace those. It hasn't been a major problem, and we also haven't had very many calves outside their projected dates. Most (85%) of the tract scores and pregnancy exams are done by one veterinarian, so there's some consistency," he says.

"Several years ago, about 1995, we felt there was a need for more consistency, so the veterinarians in the area all got together and worked with David Patterson, doing tract scores, pelvic measurements and pregnancy exams together. That helped clarify things so everyone would be on the same page, so to speak. It also helped extend the program beyond the sale aspect, getting other veterinarians involved," Mackie says.

In the beginning, several of the herds were experiencing calving problems, and the heifer program — tract scoring, pelvic measures, use of calving-ease bulls, the whole management package — has helped them.

"None of it by itself is the whole answer," Mackie says. There also has been a lot of progress in the quality of calves produced. "One of the major order buyers in the area recently made the comment that he

felt the heifer program has done more to change the genetics and improve the genetics of the cattle in the area than anything else he's seen in the last 35 years," Mackie says.

"These are professional cattle people involved in the program, and they are in the business of producing replacement females for themselves and for sale," Mackie says. "Only two out of the 16 consignors raise heifers just for sale; most producers retain some for their own cow herds."

Just like any program, he says, this one works "because the folks involved really work well together and support one another. They can make some big decisions that can have a major economic impact, and they can just sit down and do it, in a short time. ... They're in it to stay in it, and they're a good team."



Editor's Note: *This story was submitted prior to the November 2001 sale.*