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# Beef with Integrity

*Marketing alliance earns premiums for value-stacked calves.*

by **KASEY BROWN,**  
*special projects editor*

Some things are easy to understand and difficult to do, like losing weight. Some are complex, yet easy to do, like driving a car. Creating the most successful and profitable calves is one of the former. Producing value-added calves may not be an issue, but gaining added value via marketing can be difficult.

Robert Wells, animal scientist and livestock consultant with the Noble Research Institute, Ardmore, Okla., outlines the ingredients for success: Calves should be

- weaned for 60 days;
- vaccinated, dewormed, dehorned and castrated;
- trained to eat at a feedbunk and drink from a water trough; and
- have growth potential in their genetics.

How do you let buyers know whether you have those successful calves, especially if you have a smaller herd? Wells says that Integrity Beef

Alliance was formed to simplify cow-calf management decisions and to increase the marketability of calves. By following the program management requirements, Integrity Beef producers' calves normally earn \$60- to \$75-per-head premiums above calf prices.

## Higher profits

The alliance helps give marketing advantages, especially for smaller producers who aren't big enough to retain heifers and still have enough calves to send two loads off the farm annually. One way it does this is by hosting a value-added calf sale for program calves each year at the OKC West Livestock Market.

Wells notes, "What do you usually hear at sale barn pens? Calves bawling. It's not a good place to have a conversation. At this value-added calf sale, you could whisper and still be heard. Calves that are 60 days past

weaning and trained to eat and drink are less stressed at the sale barn, and they are quiet. They're bulletproof."

The cherry on top of the quiet conversation is that bawling calves exhibit 6%-10% shrink, and preconditioned calves expect 2% shrink. Wells explains that program calves gain more than 2.5 pounds (lb.) per day for 60 days, which gives them 150 additional pounds of salable weight, and it's better-quality weight to boot.

Wells shares data from the USDA National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) revealing that the national average weaning weight is 529 lb. The average weaning weight for Integrity Beef Alliance calves from 2009 to 2015 — so including heavy drought years in Texas — was 593 lb. This shows a difference of 64 additional pounds. It's not uncommon, he adds, to hear about 75 additional pounds.

"Over five years for a 25-head herd, this is an 8,000-lb. increase. Think of the better bulls you'd be able to afford with that additional income. If you look at multiple traits, you can have your cake and eat it, too," Wells shares.

Since 2009, the cost of gain for Integrity Beef calves has stayed below \$1 per pound, while the value of gain has ranged from just above \$1 to more than \$2 per pound. Each year of data, Wells shares, had more than a \$1 increase of value over cost.

However, calves don't have to be sold at the value-added sale. Cattlemen in the program receive a certificate to aid in marketing in their preferred methods, Wells notes. However, marketing the cattle with the alliance also helps get carcass data back due to partnerships down the production line, even if cattlemen don't retain ownership.

## Stacking value

By implementing specific industry-recognized best management practices, and keeping records for benchmark purposes,



Integrity Beef producers wean and sell heavier, more uniform and higher-quality calves at the same age of competitors, Wells explains.

He calls Integrity Beef a “value-stacked” program because it incorporates several value-added protocols. Participants must adhere to many strict requirements, though the requirements have all stemmed from feedback from cattle buyers and end users and industry research.

For instance, Wells explains that they switched from a value-added calf vaccination program with 45 days weaned (VAC-45) before sale to requiring 60 days weaned because they received feedback that buyers wanted longer-weaned calves and value would go up significantly.

Weaning them longer also moves their marketing to a better time of year when the market isn't flooded with calves.

Health protocols are detailed, requiring a full page of items to be checked to meet program requirements, including vaccines, dewormers, fly control and testing negative for persistent infection with bovine viral diarrhea (PI BVD).

Additionally, the vaccines given must meet brand-name requirements. Wells said that was because efficacy would be consistent and proven.

Documentation is necessary to prove the correct products were used, even going so far as having to provide receipts if necessary.

“This is all to ensure that we dot the i's and cross the t's,” Wells said.

There is a genetic component, too. Registered Angus, Red Angus, Charolais and Hereford bulls are acceptable, and bulls must be in the top 20% of their respective breed for weaning weight (WW) and yearling weight (YW) expected progeny differences (EPDs).

Cows must be 50% British breeds. Wells admits that many Alliance members live in Texas and Oklahoma, so “cattle with a little ear” are necessary. The program does allow for some *Bos indicus* influence, but only 1/8 Brahman influence is allowed.

Calving seasons must be less than 90 days, and the calving date of the first and last calf must be recorded. Calves need to be identified with alliance ear tags, too.

Producers in the program must also be Beef Quality Assurance (BQA)-certified, and share operational and financial information with Integrity Beef consultants. Benchmarks are figured

and allow producers to compare their operation across years and to similar operations. The Noble Institute also provides a free consultation service to alliance members, which is designed to help producers implement these best-management practices, and also assist with soil, pasture and range management, wildlife, horticulture, livestock and economics.

### Replacement heifer aspect

Integrity Beef has another component, a replacement heifer program. Wells says it doesn't reinvent the wheel. It takes aspects from the Missouri Show-Me Select program and tailors it to fit with Integrity Beef standards and requirements. The replacement female program's goal

is to provide females that have a solid health status that are able to produce a high-quality terminal-type calf that would prequalify for the alliance terminal program.

It also has a DNA component that no other replacement female program provides.

“The replacement female market is crowded, and that DNA testing requirement helps set these females apart,” Wells says.

The female program also has strict requirements, including health protocols, pelvic scoring, a body condition score of 5, a defined breeding season, ownership of 90 days before breeding, and emphasis on calving-ease genetics. All heifers must be virgins, and second-calf cows must have documentation that she weaned a calf in the same year she's eligible for sale.

The two programs are meant to feed off of each other, though female purchase is not restricted to alliance members. The program offers marketing assistance for females in the program at a special sanctioned sale, Wells explained. The program is gaining enough traction that one producer, who had 400 program females to sell by private treaty, was able to sell all 400 of them within a month without any advertising.

For producers who aren't sure what they need to do to earn premiums, or for those who want marketing help to gain those higher prices, the Integrity Beef Alliance is a viable option. Membership is not limited by geography. For information about Integrity Beef, visit [integritybeef.org/](http://integritybeef.org/).



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