

# PARTNERSHIP PAYS IN PROFITS



## A Virginia feeder-calf sale shows the value in cooperation.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

**W**hat do you get when you take committed producers, a tireless county agent, experienced graders supplied by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), an established state teleauction system, and an innovative stockyard manager? In the case of the Bedford Beef Producers Association Feeder Calf Sales, it all results in better prices.

### Requirements

The first requirement for producers is commitment. The calves have to be weaned and bunk-trained 60 days before the sale, have two rounds of

Scott Baker, the before-mentioned county agent, regularly does analyses for the weaned, preconditioned calves sold in the Bedford sales and compares them to graded calves sold at weekly auctions. The range in premiums for three of the sales, July 2017 and January and July 2018, range from \$44 for 670-pound (lb.) heifers to \$141.40 for 785-lb. steers.

It's enough to draw superlatives from New London producer Steve Wilkerson.

"It is a magnificent partnership between the Virginia Cattlemen's

Association (VCA), the farmers, the Extension service, VDACS, and the stockyard."

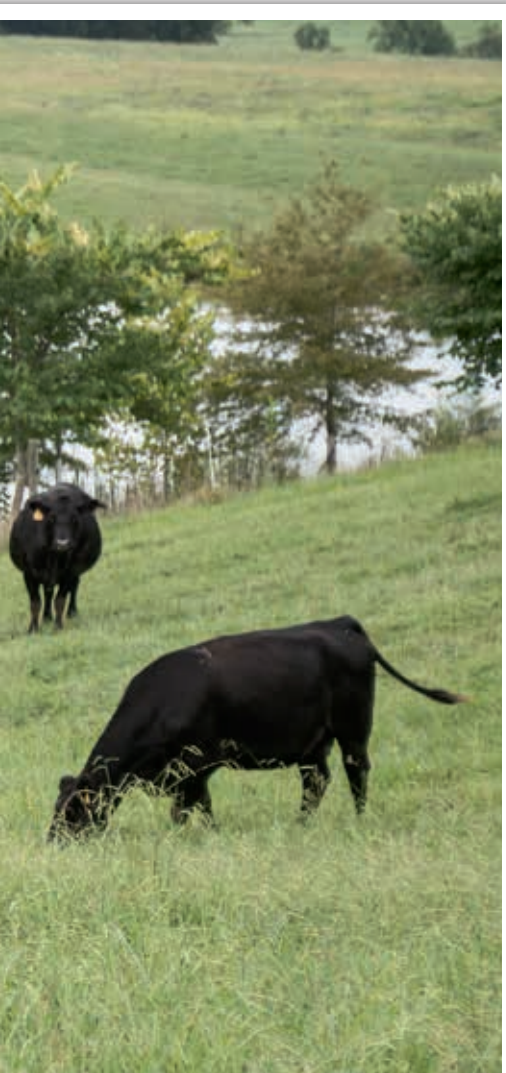
The group didn't waste any time forming that partnership. Their first meeting was in March 2017.

"There was enough interest we immediately scheduled another meeting and said, this is how it will work," Baker recalls.

Thankfully, they had input from Morgan Croft, a VDACS grader; representatives from the VCA Tel-O-Auction system; and Springlake Stockyard Manager Brandy Ferguson.



County agent Scott Baker and producer Steve Wilkerson both say the Bedford Beef Producers Association Feeder Calf sales are bringing a premium for preconditioned calves.



Above: Keith Tuck says the black calves from his Angus-based herd bring more than the red calves.

cattle come across the scale, Baker records the information on a spreadsheet.

The calves that don't meet the requirements for grade, which is Large and Medium frame and #1 or #2 for muscling, can be held overnight and sold in the Springlake weekly auction, hosted on Saturdays.

That is another plus, says Wilkerson. "I can drop my cattle off, get a weigh sheet, and go back to work. I love it."

### Learn from experience

While the current sales have only been going since July of 2017, this is actually the second go-round.

"The association started 20 years ago and has reincarnated itself," says Wilkerson. "We started out pooling truckloads 20 years ago and co-oping with the VCA Tel-O-Auctions."

He says they'd take the cattle to the sale barn a couple of weeks after the sale for pick up.

However, he says, "We had trouble getting a truckload, which is what the buyers wanted. Now, a lot more people are participating."

So far, around 30 producers have participated in the sales, which average 250 to 400 head each.

Moneta cattleman Keith Tuck, who is currently president of the

association, sold 35 steers and heifers in the first sale, although he had to sit out the July 2018 sale.

"It was so dry in the spring and summer, I was about to run out of grass and had to go ahead and sell," he explains.



Moneta, Va., producer Keith Tuck says he tries to breed a good product and wants a premium for it.

"So far, I think the sales are doing good," Tuck says. He has no problem with the preconditioning and double vaccination requirements.

"Last year, after I paid the vaccination costs and fees at the stockyard, I was making \$125 to \$150 per head over if I had sold them two months early," he says. "They were just grazing good grass. Feeding them isn't a problem in a normal year. I gave them a few bags of feed just so they would know what it was.

Working them isn't a problem. It takes two hours and I fenceline wean. That takes three days."

Steve Wilkerson also depends on grazing for the bulk of his preconditioning.

"I use whatever grass I have — native grasses, crabgrass, clover — and the best hay I have," he says. "I feed them 2 or 3 pounds a day of Southern States PowerStroke™ feed, too, and I'll get 1.5 to 2.0 pounds of gain a day."

Baker says that is the gain they want, and adds, "We try to discourage self-feeders because producers can conceivably overfeed and the cattle won't match up."

Wilkerson says he can put the gain on for \$1.50 per day for the feed and hay, while vaccinations and deworming run \$8-\$12 per head.

The stockyard charges a flat rate of \$15 per head, which Baker says usually works out to less than a fee based on weight.

Wilkerson figures he nets 20¢ per lb. over selling his calves at weaning, and says, "I'll take that any time for what little work I do."

### Consistency

That premium is one of the main

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vaccinations and be dewormed.

A grader comes out to the farm and gets an approximate weight and grade on the calves for advertising purposes. If a producer has a full truckload of his or her own, a grader will actually grade the cattle there, and the cattle can be sold in the Tel-O-Auction without leaving the farm.

Except for those truckload lots sold straight off the farm, the producers deliver their calves to Springlake Stockyard on the morning of the Friday night sale. There they are graded and sorted by frame, muscling, weight and into truckload lots when possible. An electronic identification tag (eID) is also put in one ear. As the

### Fitting in is a good thing

While there are times when it pays to stand out in a crowd, a feeder-calf sale is not one of them. Buyers want uniform truckload lots. In the case of the Bedford Beef Producers Association Feeder Calf Sale, uniform includes being Angus or heavily Angus-influenced.

Alisha Hudson-Roach, office manager at Springlake Stockyard, which hosts the Moneta, Va., feeder-calf sales, says it does limit participation for some of their customers. "A lot of the cattle have more ear to them or aren't black, so the sale doesn't work for them." They can, however, sell them in the regular weekly sale.

Keith Tuck, who has a commercial Angus and Angus-cross herd, can vouch for the value of Angus.

"Angus are what the buyers want," he says. "Every now and then I get a red calf. It can be identical to the black ones and it will bring \$100 less."

However, another advantage of the sale is those red, red-white-face or Angus-Charolais calves can be blended into a load, as long as they meet the grading standards. That isn't allowed in the regular weekly graded sale.



Springlake Stockyard hosts the Bedford Beef Producers Association Feeder Calf Sales.

reasons stockyard manager Brandy Ferguson is more than willing to go to the extra work of holding the special sales.

“Sometimes a producer will bring calves that are weaned and vaccinated to our regular weekly sale,” she says. “We’ll put them in a producer lot and sell them before the sale, but they can’t always show a premium. With the feeder-calf sales, we can show a premium to the guys who are taking it a step further than just raising a calf.”

The buyers are also pleased with the preconditioned, graded calves.

“A lot of our feeder calves we sell in our weekly sales are graded by VDACS, but we don’t know a lot about them,” says Ferguson. “We don’t know if they’ve been weaned or if they are bawling calves straight off their mamas. The cattle in the feeder-calf sale are weaned the same number of days, vaccinated and bunk-broke. When they are sold in trailer-load lots, the buyers call and want to know

when those cattle will be in the next sale. The calves respond so much better when they’ve been vaccinated and weaned.”

Still, the participants are working to make the sales even better.

Says Baker, “Ideally, to work

really well, we need to get a critical mass of cattle together of the same grade and weight. We need to be closer to 500 head per sale.”

They are already trying to accommodate calves of different weights by having a July sale and a mid-September sale.

He adds, “I think people think they have to do more than they do. It is an educational process.”

Alisha Hudson-Roach, office manager at Springlake Stockyard, believes part of it is the extra work of vaccinating and preconditioning, which is hard for part-time cattle producers with rented land and few facilities.

To try to help with the educational process, just like the original Bedford County Beef Producers Association, the group hosts meetings on herd health and marketing so more producers have an opportunity to learn.

Tuck says the cattle numbers are there, “Bedford County is in the

top five in the state for cattle numbers. It is just going to take time for people to see it pays.”

Ferguson agrees, noting, “Over time, producers will eventually

realize it pays to take the extra time to vaccinate and wean. They’ll understand there is more profit on the other side. Our goal is to have more producers doing this so we can sell cattle that are ready to go to work for the buyers, so the buyers

don’t have to do the work we should be doing here.”

In the meantime, as long as Mother Nature doesn’t mess up his plans with a drought, Keith Tuck plans on marketing his calves at the Bedford Beef Producers Association Feeder Calf Sale.

“I get more money out of them. I try to breed a good product, and I want a premium out of them,” he says. “This fits the bill.”

Editor’s note: Becky Mills is a cattlegirl and freelance writer from Cuthbert, Ga.

## Requirements for the Bedford Beef Producers Association Feeder Calf Sales

### In-barn and Load Lots Off of Farm Sale Requirements for Weaned and Vaccinated Feeder Sale

- ▶ Calves must be weaned 60 days in advance of take-in date of sale.
- ▶ Calves must have had two rounds of:
  - 5-way respiratory (one with pasteurella) (modified-live) (Examples: Bovi-Shield Gold One Shot® or Pyramid® 5 with Presponse SQ®)
  - 7-way (Example: Vision® 7-way)
- ▶ Wormed (injectable recommended) at least one time
- ▶ Second round of shots must be given a minimum of two weeks prior to sale and given per label directions (vaccinations and boosters to be given according to directions on label)
- ▶ Minimum weight 500 pounds (lb.)
- ▶ Calves need to be exposed to eating from feedbunk and drinking from water trough
- ▶ Consignors must own the calves a minimum of 90 days
- ▶ Calves must grade L & M #1 or #2 on frame (determined by VDACS graders). Rejected cattle may be left for sale on Saturday and will have access to hay and water.
- ▶ Consignors selling heifers must guarantee them open. If the buyer has a veterinarian determine that a heifer is bred, the seller of the calf will reimburse the buyer \$200.
- ▶ Steers sold in feeder-calf sale are guaranteed by consignor to not be stags or bulls. Reimbursement from consignor to buyer of \$150 will be required if veterinarian determines otherwise.
- ▶ Consignor is solely responsible for the health and vaccination requirements of calves sold and will sign an affidavit upon delivery to assure that requirements have been met.

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Springlake Stockyard Office Manager Alisha Hudson-Roach says it is hard for part-time producers to vaccinate and wean their calves.