

Meeting the Demand

Two family outfits are satisfying commercial bred-heifer needs with Angus genetics.

Story by
TROY SMITH

DOWLING BROTHERS

Draper, S.D.

“It was 15 years ago — and a year kind of like this one. Calves had been cheap, but it looked like things ought to turn around,” remembers Scott Dowling. “We anticipated some new demand for females, so we decided to buy some heifer calves and breed them to sell. We’ve been doing it every year since.”

Put simply, that’s how Scott and Tracy Dowling introduced the commercial heifer development business to their central South Dakota ranch. Phasing out their cow herd, the brothers made replacement heifers a primary livestock enterprise — one that has continued to grow in size and sophistication.

In the beginning they handled a few hundred head, but Dowling Brothers now annually markets nearly 2,500 bred heifers. Responding specifically to the demand for Angus and Angus-Hereford-cross females, the Dowlings buy heifers as calves, grow them and breed them to easy-calving Angus sires. Buyers include cowmen who don’t want to raise their own replacements or who can’t because of their terminal crossbreeding programs.

Early on, Tracy bought most of the heifers by frequenting livestock markets where reputable ranchers consigned their cattle. He still buys some, but the brothers now rely more on order buyers who procure heifers, both privately and at auction, from South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming and Nebraska. Sale barn managers also tell the Dowlings about upcoming consignments, knowing the brothers’ preference for buying large groups of fancy heifers.

“From November through February, we buy 550- to 650-pound (lb.) heifers, and it’s hard to find bargains when you’re looking for quality,” says Tracy. “We want them moderate for frame but growthy, with a lot of length and depth of body, clean-headed and feminine. We prefer to



[PHOTO BY SCOTT DOWLING]

buy from herds with performance histories, and we buy big bunches when we can. If we can buy 400 to 500 heifers from one source, that’s ideal.”

The Dowlings also look for heifer sources with first-rate vaccination and parasite-control programs. Preconditioned heifers pose fewer health problems, but the Dowlings follow up with their own vaccination program, along with routine pelvic measurements and reproductive-tract evaluation.

Utilizing homegrown feedstuffs, the brothers aim for 1¼-1½ lb. of gain per day. The ration includes 7 lb. of corn, alfalfa and prairie hay, plus supplement. The target weight for May breeding is 750 lb. By breeding time, heifers will have been culled for small pelvic areas (less than 150 square centimeters [cm²]), any reproductive irregularities, too much white, loose hide, or short tails and ears.

For several years the Dowlings conducted their own artificial insemination

(AI) program, but they now bid the job to various stud services. After studying the expected progeny differences (EPDs) for a balance of calving ease, maternal traits and respectable performance, a single AI sire is chosen to breed the heifers for two cycles before turning them out with cleanup bulls.

“The AI crew sets a schedule for putting the heifers on MGA® (melengestrol acetate). They show up to inject the Lutalyse® and then breed the heifers in groups of 500 head,” explains Tracy. “We’ve been doing it this way for about four years, and using the professionals has worked better than trying to hire local help and doing it ourselves.”

Heifers are sorted and identified with color-coded tags to indicate which were settled by AI or natural service and during which breeding period. Tags also indicate the results of ultrasound scanning to determine the sex of the calf each heifer is carrying.



Tracy and Scott Dowling's commercial heifer development business markets nearly 2,500 heifers annually. [PHOTO BY TROY SMITH]

barn for sale on the second Saturday in November. Weighing 875-950 lb., fully documented and sorted for uniformity, the heifers are offered in groups to suit the buyers.

That was a few more than the market would bear in fall 1998, admits Scott. "If that happens, we bring part of them home for the winter and calve them out. We breed them again and summer the pairs. In the fall we sell off the calves and then the cows. Sometimes second-calvers have netted more than first-calvers did the previous fall."

Most years the Dowlings have little carryover. The market for quality replacements has remained strong enough for long enough that the brothers have continued to increase numbers as their land base has expanded. Their customer list keeps growing, too, including buyers with a variety of needs.

One of their many repeat customers buys large drafts of heifers and has built a sizable herd strictly from Dowling-developed females. A first-time buyer at a previous sale was high-bidder on a single heifer for a 4-H project. Whether looking for one or a truckload, they came to Dowling Brothers for quality.

O'HARE RANCH

Ainsworth, Neb.

Buyers calling about O'Hare Ranch heifers routinely ask about pelvic measurements, performance information and EPDs of service sires. Here, too, there is a preference for straightbred Angus and black baldies that are bred for calving ease and a short calving season. That's the kind Kenneth O'Hare and his sons, Doug and Corby, have been marketing for most of a decade.

Before that the O'Hares ran commercial cows on their Sandhills ranch and retained ownership of the calves through their own feedlot. Getting into heifer development almost by accident, Kenneth was trying to buy steers in Montana when he found a good buy on yearling heifers.

Deciding to turn them out with bulls rather than feed them, the O'Hares sold their bred heifers successfully and decided to pursue heifer development on a regular basis. AI was added to the program, and the cow herd was dispersed to make room for more heifers. Now close to



From left, Kenneth, Corby and Doug O'Hare dispersed their cow herd to make room for developing heifers. They currently market 1,500 head annually. [PHOTO BY TROY SMITH]

The Dowlings enlist the services of ultrasound pioneer Ralph Miller, Livingston, Mont., and the "sexing" information has attracted the really discriminating bred-heifer buyers.

"Not only can customers buy heifers that will calve within a 21-day period, they can buy only heifers carrying bull calves, or heifers that will have only heifer

calves. Feedback has shown the ultrasound to be 99.9% accurate for sexing, and we even identify the heifers that are carrying twins," adds Scott.

By the end of the grazing season the heifers have been rotated through a series of pastures and are concentrated within several miles of Fort Pierre. The whole bunch is trailed to the Fort Pierre auction

1,500 head of replacement-quality females are marketed annually.

Still in charge of purchasing, Kenneth now buys medium-frame heifer calves weighing 500-600 lb. He says baldies and straightbreds usually cost about the same, but crossbreds of uniform quality often are harder to find. Whenever possible, he likes to buy heifers on the ranch where they were raised.

“We like to see the cows and bulls a set of heifers came from. We look for uniformity and a good set of records on source herds,” he explains. “We’ve had the best luck buying what we want from Angus-on-Angus programs in Montana. Sometimes we can buy most of a heifer crop from one ranch. If they work, we’ll be back wanting more.”

The O’Hares winter the heifers on cornstalks and a supplemental ration of silage, alfalfa and a little corn, wanting them to weigh at least 700 lb. by breeding time in April. By then 20%-30% of the heifers will have been culled — some because palpation revealed reproductive unsoundness or pelvic areas measuring less than 150 cm². Some get the gate for lack of uniform size and type, and a few for color, since baldies with too much white shawl are less acceptable to buyers.

“We cull hard for temperament, too,” Doug adds. “We try to handle them right to keep them gentle, but they’ll be worked on foot, with horses and four-wheelers, and exposed to dogs and kids. Anything that can’t take it will be culled and fed out.”

After synchronization with MGA and Lutalyse, the O’Hares heat detect with a hired crew consisting mostly of women.

“We usually have the same people year after year, using two detectors per 250 head,” says Corby. “They ride pens from daylight until dark, finding and sorting heifers. The ladies who have helped us do an excellent job of handling cattle while keeping them calm and gentle.”

Heifers are bred AI for two cycles — six days on the first and, after 2½ weeks, for another 10 days on the second cycle. Detailed records note which heifers bred on each cycle and by which technician. Then the heifers go to summer pasture on the O’Hares’ ranch where they run with bulls for 35 days.

By September the bred heifers will weigh close to 950 lb. This is when most are sold by private treaty, sorted according to calving period. Some customers like to buy only heifers coming from one

original source. That’s fine with the O’Hares, whose records easily trace individual animals to the source ranch.

Doug, Corby and Kenneth collaborate when it comes time to price their sale heifers. They say pricing comes about through “conference and confrontation” and reflects their investment in the heifers plus as much profit as the market will stand.

They do receive calls from ranchers interested in big bunches of heifers, and while interest in packages of 200-500 head is increasing, only a few of those inquiries result in transactions. Orders of 100-200 head are more common, but most contracts involve groups of up to 50 head. That’s OK since the O’Hares view most high-volume orders as one-time-only deals. What they really like to see is the customer who comes back to buy 20-30 heifers year after year.

“We like it when buyers tell us they are really pleased with their heifers,” says Corby. “It’s a happy customer who reports that his nice, gentle heifers got done calving in 21 days, without any significant calving trouble. That’s a happy customer, and he’ll tell his neighbors about it.”

