



## Alabama board sale evolves with buyer requests.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

When the first Wednesday of August rolls around, 150-plus cattle folks will crowd into the Autaugaville, Ala., ag center for the 41st Producers' Feeder Calf Sale. The sale didn't reach middle age by ignoring its customers. Case in point, that's why it is a board sale.

When Bill Lipscomb first started his job as cattle manager at Autauga Farming Co. in 1975, owner Milton "Buzz" Wendland was selling cattle by sealed bids.

"There was a lot of resistance from the buyers," Lipscomb recalls. "Although that wasn't the case at Autauga, there was the opportunity for people to not be honest, and at times,

buyers left a good bit of money on the table."

As a result, in 1980 Wendland conducted the first board sale with buyers bidding in person and over

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Above: Prattville, Ala., cattleman Bill Lipscomb has been a leader in the Producers' Feeder Calf Sale since it was started in 1980.

the phone. Now, veteran order buyer Dell King is the only one who still actually comes to the sale, but there is no doubt the producer-members of the sale continue to listen to buyer requests.

"Our buyers are part of the team," says Lipscomb.

Although he retired from Autauga Farming Co. in 2019, he continues to be a key part of the board sale, and he and his sister/partner, Linda, market their own cattle there.

### Health protocol

After the board sale format was started, Lipscomb says they didn't do much new for several years. However, instead of

being mostly local order buyers, they started getting feedlot customers buying direct. That led to requests for more vaccinations.

“At that time we were vaccinating against blackleg, and that’s about all. We had never heard of somnus,” Lipscomb recalls.

Now the group is on the Zoetis WeanVAC™ program, which includes two rounds of viral vaccines, clostridial, and *Mannheimia* (pasteurella) vaccines, as well as a dewormer.

“We’re actually giving less needle sticks now because the animal health suppliers are making vaccines with multiple products in them,” he notes.

At Lipscomb’s home operation they castrate at birth. At 5 or 6 months, he and Linda, with help from other family members and friends, give the first round of vaccinations.

They are also enrolled in the Alabama Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) program, so as the fall-born calves reach the 205-day mark, they corral them to weigh them and give the second round of vaccines. When they wean them a few weeks later, the calves are protected from disease and have less stress during the actual weaning process.

Although Alabama is a brucellosis-free state,



At the buyers’ request, the majority of the calves in the Producers’ Feeder Calf Sale are Angus or Angus crosses.

some producers choose to have their heifer calves vaccinated against brucellosis in case they end up as replacement heifers instead of in the feedyard.

“That makes the heifers more desirable,” Lipscomb adds. “They can go more places.”

Since a veterinarian is required to give the brucellosis vaccine, the process adds to the overall health programs of the herds, Lipscomb says.

“It gives our vet a chance to be around and observe the cattle so, if he has to write a health certificate, he has experience with the herd.

“Our vet, Sean Custard, pregnancy-tests for us in the fall, gives a Bang’s vaccine in the spring and semen-tests the bulls,” he continues. “He probably does half the cattle in the sale. That’s something a lot of people don’t do, is involve their vet in marketing. We feel it is important.”

“With calves straight off the cow, you’ll have limited buyers. When the cattle are weaned, you’ll have 15 to 20 buyers.” — *Dell King*



Almost half of the cattle in the sale are preconditioned at Cleveland Land and Cattle Co., where calves of similar genetics can be commingled.

## Preconditioned

In the 1990s, the producers started

*Continued on page 142*

preconditioning, once again at their buyers' request. At first, like most of the industry, they considered 30 days enough time to train the calves to eat from a bunk and get them over the stress of weaning. Then they went to 45 days, a requirement of the Zoetis WeanVAC program. As 60 days became the industry gold standard, they adopted it, too.

"It takes that much time before you can say the health is solid," says Jerry Etheredge, sale manager. "Corporate feedyards don't recognize the cattle as being weaned if they're not weaned 60 days."

The practice is mutually beneficial, he adds. "It is better for the buyer, and it is better for the seller, because they're selling a better product."

Lipscomb says preconditioning can be a big-ticket item when feed costs are high, but it's not always prohibitive.

"In a normal year, we feel like we make money on weaning as long as we can keep the cost of gain below the selling price."

He says it normally runs around \$150-\$200 a head for feed and yardage. In return, besides the health benefits, his steers normally go from weaning weights of 675 pounds (lb.) to 825 lb. at shipping. Heifers go from 600 lb. to 700 lb.

"It would be a big mistake to skip preconditioning. It is straight out not going to cost nearly as much to vaccinate and background the cattle as what it is going to bring in. Even when cattle are cheap, they'll be worth more," says buyer Dell King. "With calves straight off the cow, you'll have limited buyers. When the cattle are weaned, you'll have 15 to 20 buyers."

The veteran buyer adds: "Health



Sister-brother team Linda and Bill Lipscomb market their feeder calves through the Producers' Feeder Calf Sale. They continue to adapt their management strategies to meet buyer requests.

is awfully, awfully important. When the cattle get sick and die, you don't get repeat customers."

### Increased uniformity

Preconditioning leads to another bonus for the buyers — more uniform calves. Almost half of the



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calves in the sale, which normally averages around 4,000 head, are preconditioned at Prattville's Cleveland Land and Cattle Co. While most of the producers have large enough herds to consign at least a truckload, there are a few who need to put their calves in with someone's with similar genetics. Since many of the cattle are preconditioned together, Etheredge can go ahead and sort them at the beginning of the weaning process.

"I don't like to commingle calves that haven't been weaned together because of the stress and disease risk," he explains.

It suits King, who says: "We're looking for load lots, and these cattle have been handled the same and had the same vaccination program."

"By preconditioning our calves at Cleveland Land and Cattle, it provides us another piece of the puzzle," Lipscomb says.

It is also proof of the loyalty and continuity of the group. Owner

Chip Cleveland's grandfather, Ed Wadsworth, was the first producer to join Autauga Farming Co. in the original board sale.

## Value in load lots

Josh Maples, Mississippi State University ag economist, says it is no mystery why buyers like load lots. "You're doing a lot of the buyer's work for them."

Besides saving the buyer the time and hassle of sitting in a stockyard to buy calves one at a time, it also saves the calves from the stress of going through a stockyard and being commingled with calves from other operations.

In the case of the Producers' sale, it doesn't hurt that most of those load lots are black.

"I'd say probably 90% of them are Angus or Angus crosses," says Lipscomb. "Once again, that's at the buyers' request."

When those elements are in place, including uniform truckload lots, the same vaccination protocol, and the type of cattle the buyer wants, Maples says it adds up to a successful sale.

Load lots alone can make a difference. In Tennessee, research from 2008 to 2013 showed video sales of load lots brought an average of \$110.16 per hundredweight (cwt.) compared to \$105.08 for local sales.

As for the Producers' Feeder Calf Sale, Lipscomb says they'll keep doing what they've been doing.

"Our buyers are part of the team," he emphasizes. ■

## Good folks make for a good sale

While the 25 members of the Producers Feeder Calf Sale are particular about the calves they consign, they're also particular about members.

"We have set up a nominating committee," says Bill Lipscomb. "They look at the cattle and talk to the producer, then the nominating committee brings it before the whole membership."

"The quality of the people in the sale is just as important as the quality of the cattle," the Prattville, Ala., cattleman stresses. "If the people are the right quality, they will see what other people are doing and make adjustments if they need to."

While Lipscomb won't claim it, his sister, Linda Lipscomb, says he's one of those quality people. Linda points to Bill: "He's very

responsible and respects other people. Other people respect him and the work he's done."

Lipscomb is grateful the other members listened to him 13 years ago.

"I used to be in charge of the sale. I had to write the contracts," he explains. "I was the one that everybody got mad at if something went wrong. It got to the point I told the group I couldn't and wouldn't do it anymore."

Thankfully, Jerry Etheredge stepped up as sale manager. Now, whether it is videoing the cattle ahead of time so buyers can get a good look at them, making sure the cattle are in

those uniform feedlot-ready lots, coordinating the trucking, or making sure the consignors get paid, Etheredge or Darrell Stokes, his co-worker at Montgomery Stockyard, does it.

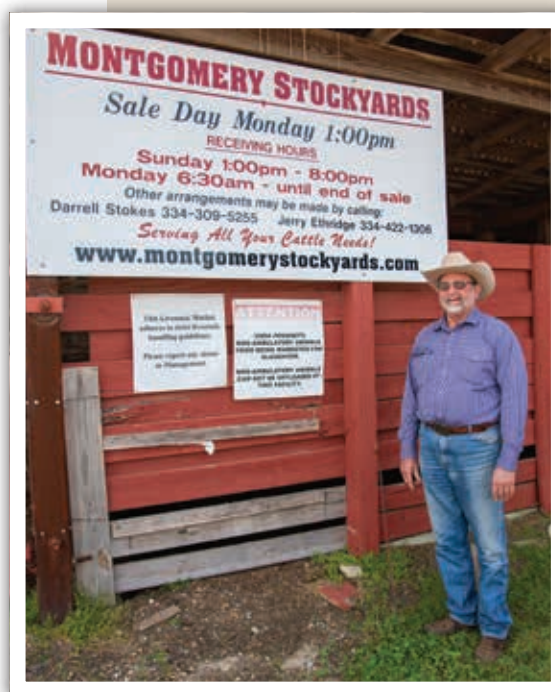
"They are the reason our marketing program is where it is now," says Bill.

Etheredge considers it a privilege.

"When I was a teenager I'd come watch the Producers' sale," he recalls. "I never dreamed I'd have the opportunity to represent and market some of the best feeder cattle in the Southeast."

For his services, Etheredge charges a 2% commission.

"That isn't a cost. It pays," says Bill Lipscomb.



For the past 13 years, Jerry Etheredge at Montgomery Stockyards has worked as the sales manager for the Producers Feeder Calf Sale. He is paid a 2% commission for his efforts.