

Eye on the End Game

Louisiana heifer program helps producers learn how their cattle perform when they leave their pastures.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

Little wonder Louisiana producers breathe a sigh of relief when they see the door slide shut on a semitrailer load of their calves. Between hurricanes, floods, drought, heat, humidity, killer mosquitoes and less-than-top-quality forages, they've got their hands full trying to get a calf to the weaning pen. Worrying about how those calves are going to perform at their next stop is probably not on their to-do list. The folks at McNeese State University's heifer-development program are working to change that.

"To me, when you have a disconnect between the cow-calf and the finished product, the cow-calf end tends to go astray," says Bill Storer, McNeese animal scientist. "They're more worried about having a cow that will tolerate the conditions and having a live calf than what it's going to look like on the dinner table."

The Kinder, La.,-based heifer program helps with answers. In the fall, producers send their weaned heifers to McNeese, where they are introduced to the ration and facilities during a warm-up period. They are weighed once a month for a total of 120 days. They are scanned by ultrasound to describe carcass traits before they leave in March.

Producers have the option of leaving their heifers for another month to have them synchronized for estrus, artificially inseminated at a fixed time and pregnancy-checked 30 days after breeding.

Storer works hard to keep heifers gaining a conservative 1.75 pounds (lb.) a day — low enough to not cause hoof or digestive problems, but high enough to meet their target weight at breeding. The base of the ration is corn silage, raised right next to the heifer facility. Storer also feeds a 33% protein supplement, usually soybean meal, with a vitamin-mineral premix added; lasalocid, an ionophore; and ground corn.

"We get our silage tested," says Storer. "The premix is designed to offset deficiencies in it."

He says the ionophore helps cut down on coccidia and helps the rumen fermentation process.

"When we take our monthly weights, we'll adjust the ration to try to have them gain as close to that as possible. We may have some English-Continental-cross cattle — larger framed, probably a little growthier — that'll do 2 or 3 pounds, but we might have some heavily Brahman-influenced or Wagyu-type that may only do a pound a day. We try to



The heifer calves from Larry Richard's Angus herd will be heading to the heifer-development program at McNeese State University's Fuller Farm when they're weaned.

group them as best we can and adjust the ration to get them as close together as we can to that 1.75 pounds a day."

Need for consistency

One thing they don't do is graze the heifers on ryegrass.

"We've done ryegrass trials at McNeese,



and the availability of forage is so inconsistent,” Storer explains. “It all depends on environmental conditions, rainfall, temperature. That means this year we may only be able to take in 100 head; next year, 20 head. You can run about one or two head an acre on a good stand of ryegrass. On 100 acres of corn silage, I’ll



A self-feeding silage gate allows heifers to have access to free-choice corn silage and reduces labor.

Silage self-feeder

While silage is a great cattle feed, it isn’t the easiest forage to handle. At McNeese State University, a self-feeding gate allows heifers to have free-choice access to bagged silage.

“If you have a total mixed ration (TMR), that takes a lot of time to feed,” says Bill Storer, McNeese animal scientist. “Here, one man can feed.”

The silage gates at McNeese’s Fuller Farm were made in a high-school shop class. They’re about 13 feet wide, and the top has stanchions similar to those used to feed dairy cows. The bottom is made of two treated 2-inch (in.) x 12-in. boards that are dropped down in the frame. They also have A-framed wings on each end.

The stanchions were made different widths, depending on whether they were intended for heifers, cows or bulls, says Storer. “If you have one made for bulls in the heifer pen, they’ll climb through.”

Bulls and cows can get their heads stuck if they try to eat out of the gates made for heifers. Typically, they have the stanchions spaced 12 in. apart for the heifers, then go wider depending on the average size of the cows or bulls.

feed 300 head all winter long; and on the remnants of that, I’ll keep about 100 head through the spring and summer. I’ll do that in 100 days from the time I plant the seed until I harvest the corn silage. That is pretty difficult to do with any other forage.”

Calculating costs

The cost of the program is based on feed costs and averages around \$3 a day per head this year, depending on the weight of the heifer, bull or steer. As a service to area producers, McNeese also develops bulls and finishes out cattle to be custom-processed at the McNeese harvest facility.

For the last three years, purebred Angus breeder Larry Richard has enrolled his

heifers and/or bull calves in the McNeese program.

“I put a pencil to it. It is equal to what it would cost me to feed them,” he says. “Plus, they’re out of my way, and I know they’re looked after.”

Richard adds, “I really believe in education. It is teaching these college kids, as well as educating cattlemen.”

The New Iberia, La., cattleman says when he dropped his cattle off, he saw Storer coaching a college student on low-stress cattle handling.

“When I was a little boy, it was my job to bring the cows in the barn at night,” he says. “I learned there was a way to move cows without stress.”

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He also likes to keep track of his heifers' progress with the monthly weight reports he gets with his invoice. His most used data, though, is that from the carcass ultrasound, which measures rib fat; ribeye area (REA); and intramuscular fat (IMF), or marbling. After reviewing his data, an extension specialist recommended he focus on IMF.

"That information is helpful when I'm buying semen from different bulls," he says. "I want a bull that is 10% or better on breed average on IMF."

By no means a single-trait selector, however, Richard also pays close attention to heifer pregnancy (HP) expected progeny differences (EPDs), weaning weights and docility, as well as the other dollar value indexes and EPDs provided by the American Angus Association. "After a few years, you can really tell the difference, especially on docility."

Storer likes to hear those comments, especially on carcass quality. That was the main reason the late Bill Fuller donated his



Larry Richard uses the ultrasound carcass data collected on his heifers at the McNeese State University heifer-development program to make breeding decisions.

Angus is the easy choice

McNeese State University Animal Scientist Bill Storer, director of the heifer-development program, gives producers a choice of bull breeds if they leave their heifers at the development center for breeding by artificial insemination (AI).

"I don't favor any one particular breed, but I generally try to push them to use a low-birth-weight black Angus. The main reason is I can count on the EPDs (expected progeny differences) to be high-accuracy. Angus are also one of the more moderate-framed breeds. If I select a low-birth-weight black Angus, it is generally going to be low-birth-weight for most breed types."

While purebred breeder Larry Richard waits until he gets his heifers home from the program to breed them, Angus is the clear choice.

"I just like the cattle. I thought about Brahman, but there really isn't a market for them. I talked to a lot of people, especially at the sale barn," he says. "Angus are easy to sell. Three or four people already want to look at the bulls I have in the bull-development program at McNeese."

The New Iberia, La., producer, who has had Angus since 1994, says, "The [American] Angus Association has millions and millions of data entries. The more information you have, the more likely you are to make better decisions."

He also says, "I like the color black."

farm, the present site of the heifer development program, to McNeese.

"He tried to get the industry to focus on

how their cattle would do in the feedlot and meat quality," Storer says.

By using the ultrasound carcass data from



Judy Fuller's late husband, Bill Fuller, donated his farm to McNeese State University. Animal scientist Bill Storer worked alongside Fuller until his death.

Cooperation pays

While the main purpose of the McNeese State University heifer-development program is to help producers, it is also a prime example of how cooperation between cattle producers and a public institution pays. The late Kinder, La., cattleman Bill Fuller had roots in a family farm in Indiana. As a result, he was familiar with and

participated in retained ownership. He would ship truckloads of his weaned and backgrounded Sim-Angus steers and feeder heifers to feedlots in Texas. He wanted fellow Louisiana producers to be able to see how their cattle would perform in the feedlot and on the rail.

In 2007, Fuller met with then McNeese President Robert Hebert (now deceased) and then Department of Agricultural Sciences Dean, now

Vice President Frederick 'Chip' LeMieux and began turning the ownership and management of his farm over to the university. Bill Storer was hired and worked with Fuller until Fuller's death in 2020.

"I learned a lot from him," says Storer. "I had the book knowledge, but he taught me about running a cattle farm."

In 2011, Storer got a USDA grant that funded research focusing on retained ownership and introducing that to producers. "The three-year study helped us branch off into the feeder-cattle program and bull test in addition to the heifer program."

"We wanted to incentivize retained ownership," Storer says. "That's the main reason Mr. Fuller wanted to cooperate with us."

The arrangement has also worked well for Fuller's widow, Judy, who still lives on the farm.

"They are good neighbors," she says, adding: "I didn't want a farm. It is too much work, and Bill would be very pleased with the results and the progress."

their heifers and EPDs from the bulls they use, producers can see quick results, says Jason Duggin, University of Georgia (UGA) animal scientist. "Carcass traits are highly heritable. A producer can make rapid genetic change in one generation."

Duggin, who oversees the Heifer Evaluation and Reproductive Development (HERD) program in Georgia, provides genomic data, as well as gain, temperament and reproductive information to producers participating in the HERD program.

As for Larry Richard, he points to three of his fall-born heifers. "I look forward to sending those three next year." **ABB**

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