

Maintaining the Glow



Florida calves aiming for CAB target.

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Gates locked, tails tucked, double-decker fueled. The only thing missing is the impending question, “Are we there yet?” Florida calves seem to know not to ask, as if they’ve always known they would take to the highways north and west.

The annual roadtrip is simple: just a quick 1,500-mile journey to the Midwest, where corn and

wheat are plentiful. The process is straightforward. Unload. Vaccinate. Grow. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Geography and environment force native Florida calves to leave the subtropical wetland they call home and embark on the adventure to the drier flatlands of the Western Plains. There are dollars involved, like a \$6- to \$8-per-hundredweight (cwt.) underlying discount to the national average, and more than that in freight, for a total setback of \$15-\$18 per cwt.

Fair or not, facts are facts. But a diversion from the common route may show that cattle from the Sunshine State can shine just as well as those from any other state; that is, when they change their zip code.

A new destination

For Buck Island Ranch, Lake Placid, Fla., a swift change mid-transit could lead to that desired premium of \$80-\$100 per head. The south Florida ranch represents cattle producers throughout the southeastern United States who can add value to their cattle and increase profitability by partnering with feedlots in the Plains and aiming for a high-quality beef target.

Buck Island calves had a more specific destination in 2010, getting off that double-decker truck at Pratt (Kan.) Feeders LLC. The new relationship with this Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot implies there is more to come from the Angus-influenced cattle.

Manager Jerry Bohn says the Kansas feedlot purchased nearly 500 early-weaned calves from the ranch and integrated them into its feeding program after 150 days on grass. The calves, to be harvested in June 2011, are proving to be comparable



Above: The 10,500-acre spread is home to 3,000 cows, which graze the Bahia grass pasture and marshland.

Left: Ranch Manager Gene Lollis wanted to create a lasting, high-quality product for the consumer, and that sparked interest at CAB.

with local cattle as far as growth and durability.

Pratt Feeders became aware of the Buck Island cattle genetics after assistant manager Dave Latta toured the ranch last spring with CAB’s Gary Fike, beef cattle specialist. Buying them on a video auction last summer with plans to market them on the U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid this summer, Bohn says, “Everything was right for us. They just fit our program.”

In past years, Buck Island has sold to the highest bidder, but the relationship between producer and feeder amounted to very little. However, Ranch Manager Gene Lollis wanted to create a lasting, high-quality product for the consumer, and that sparked interest at CAB. Fike has made several trips to Florida, and Lollis came to Kansas on a spring 2010 tour. A relationship between producer, genetic advisor and feedlot manager soon ensued.

“Not only will they benefit by getting carcass data,” Fike says, “but they will be able to take that information to do some genetic selection and improve their carcass merit, creating higher demand right from the consumer.”

Lollis complements the ranch’s Braford and Brangus cows with high-quality, registered Angus bulls to get the carcass characteristics that result in higher value based on marbling. His focus is beyond pounds of increased production. “We’re in the beef business, so we looked at how we can produce a calf that’s going to work down the chain,” he says. “Are the pounds we’re producing good pounds?”

Maintaining the homefront

A graduate of the University of Florida, Lollis joined the ranch 17 years ago with a passion and desire to preserve Florida agriculture. “If



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Cattle from the state are proven competitors when producers are focused on quality. June results of Buck Island calves grown and harvested in the Texas Panhandle show 90.3% of steers and 89.7% of heifers graded USDA Choice or better.

Lollis looks forward to seeing the CAB acceptance numbers from USPB next summer.

“It happens through relationships,” he says. “Sitting face-to-face with the people who have purchased our calves and asking what they saw and what we should improve. At the end of the day, it’s about working together to make a better tomorrow.”

Jim Handley, executive vice president of the Florida Cattlemen’s Association, says discounting local cattle on perceived

performance is unfair. He hopes a byproduct of Florida Heritage Beef will elevate the reputation of these diamonds in the rough.

“We really have advanced the quality of the feeder calves we produce in Florida, but not everybody in the country is aware of it,” Handley says. “We hope our cattle quality will no longer be a secret.”



I could get out here and help someone stay in this lifestyle for just one more day it’s worth it to me,” he says.

With just one other full-time cowhand, three jacks of all trades, a great office manager and some loyal dogs, he manages the 10,500-acre spread where 3,000 cows roam Bahia grass pasture and marshland. Located in the Istokpoga-Indian Prairie Basin in south-central Florida, palm trees and oak “hammocks” glisten in the sun as the cattle graze or rest.

The award-winning ranch is more than a self-sustaining commercial cattle operation. The MacArthur Agro-ecology Research Center at Buck Island is dedicated to the long-term study of Florida’s cattle ranches, enabling researchers to investigate ecological interactions in a realistic setting.

As with most learning facilities, growth and expansion come about naturally. A familiar concept where small ranchers join forces to better market their cattle was tweaked to create a coalition of eight of Florida’s larger cattle operations, encompassing 40,000 cows and a great deal of land. Florida Heritage Beef™ was founded in 2008 by like-minded producers aiming for the same high-quality beef goals. Quarterly meetings and ranch visits foster time to share agribusiness and cattle expertise as they relate to management and business decisions.

“We’re marketing on the emphasis of quality,” Lollis says. “We’ve got to be focused on the consumer because it’s our calf that meets his plate.”

Florida Heritage Beef members stand behind uniform loads of individually identified, age- and source-verified steer and heifer calves. All cattle are produced under Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines, with a unified vaccination program and known herd genetics. They offer a consistent product without commingling the animals.

Working against the perception that Southeastern cattle don’t measure up to those from the rest of the United States, the Florida coalition showcases the truth that disproves the stereotype. “Yes, we’re from Florida, and we’re proud of what we raise,” Lollis says. “Our calves are healthy and durable. They come at a time of year where you can’t get them anywhere else.”