

Help Yourself



Missouri Extension agent Shawn Coats (right) initiated a producer education initiative to encourage producers in his area, like Brian Hunt (left), to work cooperatively to build market power and develop value-based cattle marketing programs.

PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

Missouri community of producers learns to improve beef quality by working together.

Story by
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Some of the best beef cows in the Midwest were grazing in the hills just 50 or 60 miles northeast of Kansas City, Mo. Shawn Coats recognized that 15 years ago, but the Braymer,

Mo., vocational agriculture teacher saw a barrier to further progress. Producers were too busy with ranch chores to expand their horizons to include new ideas, technology and carcass data.

"These guys just didn't like to travel a whole lot," Coats says. "They have too much going on at home to leave and go to meetings."

With part of his job linked to the Missouri Extension Service, Coats saw a producer education initiative as a good fit for his area. The idea was to work cooperatively to build market power and develop value-based cattle

marketing programs.

Building on the local Young Farmers structure, Coats organized seminars and invited beef industry leaders to present the latest information. As the program gained popularity, the regulars decided to call themselves the Green Hills Group. It became something of a template for five somewhat similar alliances that developed in the 1990s across Missouri.

Coats says producer interest has been strong from the start, "especially if food is provided," he says with a chuckle.

Working together

The group really began to attract more members when it started commingling calves before shipping them to the Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) or other feedyards. That helped fill truckloads and provided a larger herd of local cattle for benchmarking. More data led to more-informed culling decisions.

Busy producers soon realized many other advantages in taking time out for the local meetings.

"The group members have found that they can share ideas and work



"Everything starts with breeding selection," Brian Hunt, Green Hills Group member, says. "Higher-quality cattle produce higher-quality beef."



together in bettering themselves,” Coats says. “I really believe they take away a lot by having organized educational programs. Some good things have taken place within the individual herds with the information taken home from these activities.”

One offshoot is the C&C Angus Production Sale, started by Green Hills seedstock producers. One of those producers, Brian Hunt explains the C&C name refers to the nearby Carroll and Caldwell County line.

Most of the producers in the Green Hills Group raise Angus or Angus-cross cattle. Hunt had gathered carcass data on several groups of calves and relayed the importance of using that data to make culling decisions. His presentations prompted other members to join in sending their calves to the TCSCF Iowa feedlots.

CAB connection

Group participation and discussion took carcass data to a new level of importance, Hunt says. The seminars and discussions have helped him focus on data-driven selection for higher quality, better-balanced bulls and replacement heifers. They also helped adjust sights for hitting the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) target.

“Everything starts with breeding selection,” Hunt says. “Higher-quality cattle produce higher-quality beef.” Records from TCSCF show Hunt Farms Angus sire groups have reached as high as 60% CAB.

“Carcass data is essential, but sometimes it gives you more questions than answers,” he says. “That’s where the Green Hills Group comes in, and discussion helps to answer those questions.”

Donald Davies, whose family operates an Angus-cross herd east of Braymer, has been attending Green Hills meetings for more than 10 years. He agrees that the exchanges have added focus.

“Being a part of the group has really helped producers gain the background knowledge needed to hit the CAB target,” Davies says.

One of the major changes his family

adopted was a move from selling feeder calves to retaining ownership.

“I was totally against feeding cattle when the idea was first brought up during a Green Hills meeting,” he says now. “But several members wanted us to retain ownership on the calves we were sending to the [TCSCF] feedyard, so we tried it, and we’ve been doing it ever since.”

The group helped Davies use carcass

data “to reveal the weaknesses” in their herd for culling decisions and begin creep-feeding calves to improve their rate of CAB acceptance. Acting on TCSCF data, Davies and other Green Hills members also adjusted their vaccination protocols.

Since Davies and his sons, Darrin and David, have become more carcass-quality focused, the ranch has seen significant

improvement. One recent set of calves reached 68% CAB.

Of course, the Green Hills members are aiming for more knowledge and even better results. “It seems like every time I go to a meeting, I learn more,” Davies says. “And the more things you learn, the more you find out you don’t know.”



Sharing information is helping producers in the Green Hills Group attain a higher percentage of CAB acceptance.