

# No Time for Trouble

*Wyoming rancher and feedlot work together to ease labor crunch, add quality potential.*



*Story & photos by*  
**PAUL DYKSTRA**

Ever since Jw Nuckolls' father traded 100 horses for a Wyoming ranch northwest of Devils Tower in 1915, the family has intertwined

Nuckolls Ranch avoids pine needle abortions by calving in the fall so cows are in their third trimester during the summer, when grass is readily accessible and they aren't foraging under trees.

Western tradition with uncommon practicality. These days, time management is the key for Nuckolls, who, with wife Thea and son Will,

coordinates a large band of ewes, an Angus-based cow herd and a seasonal hunting operation in the pine-covered hills outside of Hulett, Wyo.

The possibility of snow and extreme cold overlaps much of the calendar in the northeast corner of the state, keeping the trio especially busy during spring lambing. Using no outside labor to assist with the numerous tasks throughout the year, the family shifts their focus and priorities as seasonal demands require.

"We're just about backwards from everybody else," Nuckolls says. "Most everyone that runs both sheep and cattle 'pasture-lamb' the sheep and looks after the cows when they're calving.

"Our cows are strictly on their own," he says. "We don't even ride on them or anything, just keep mineral out there. We don't have time for any problems."

Although the complexity of caring for the large numbers of both species is eased somewhat by the seasonal division, Nuckolls explains a bigger motive for fall calving.

## **Overcoming challenges**

"The labor is one thing," he says, "but the pine needles are the driving force. Dad had cattle here, but at that time nobody had anything better than a 60% calf crop in this country because they aborted so many calves."

A malady so common in the region as to warrant an official name, "pine needle abortion" affects cows that ingest Ponderosa pine needles during the third trimester. On the Nuckolls Ranch, calving in the fall solves the issue since cows are in their third trimester during the summer, when grass is readily accessible and they aren't foraging under trees as they would when snow covers winter pastures.

Another headache that the family creatively avoids is managing a bull battery throughout the year. "We hate to own bulls," Nuckolls says. "We don't have time to fix fence behind them. We like to get them, breed, and get rid of them before they tear everything down."

The solution is leasing from spring-calving neighbors who avoid



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pine needles during winter grazing by fencing cattle away from problem areas. That affords the ranch ready access to quality bulls that would otherwise be standing idle in late fall, creating a win-win for both parties.

One tradition Nuckolls had stood by for many years was that of managing his calves on grass to a year of age after weaning, and developing replacement heifers at home. As yearlings, the terminal cattle were sent to Nebraska feedlots where Nuckolls retained ownership to slaughter.

### Win-win

But to further lighten the ranch's workload, in 2007 this strategy got a bit of a tweak. Instead of worrying with the calves through weaning and then developing and breeding the heifers, the 2006 calf crop was shipped to Torrington, Wyo., cattle feeder Paul Miller.

The owner-operator of Miller Cattle and Feedyards, along with his wife, Christine, and a small crew at the feedlot, handled the freshly weaned calves and prepared them to go back to the Nuckolls Ranch to graze through the summer. But custom services didn't stop there, Miller explains.

"We got the first set of calves in the spring of 2007 and sent them back to grass on the ranch in May," he says. "Then, they came back to the feedlot in the fall, where we kept them for 30 days to get them on a mineral and vaccination program. We synchronized and AIed [artificially inseminated] the heifers, preg-checked 35 days later and sorted off the opens and culls to be finished out. Then we kicked the bred heifers out on cornstalks for them."

In the true spirit of cooperation, Nuckolls also left the genetic decision to Miller, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) licensee, when it came to selecting a bull for AI service.

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— *Jw Nuckolls*

"We used an Angus bull that we thought would make some good replacement females but also not hurt him in the feedlot," Miller explains. "I think we'll see continual improvement if we keep doing that, if he retains females out of those heifers."

As the terminal steers and heifers concluded the finishing phase at Miller's operation, the closeout sheets were favorable. With the steers gaining more than 3.5 pounds (lb.) a day and the heifers just below that, both men were satisfied.

"They were healthy coming back into the feedlot and the cattle gained really well," Miller recalls. "The steers were 94% Choice with 33% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®). The heifers went 18% Prime, 81% Choice and 58% CAB. They were sure good enough to sell easily."

Yield Grade (YG) 4s were held to 9% on steers, but 18% on heifers. They'll factor that in when it comes time to set a marketing date on next year's crop. Again, Miller has analyzed the possibilities.

"Maybe we fed those cattle just a nickel too long," he says. "Maybe, if we had gotten them out the door just a little sooner, we could have improved the feed conversion and yield grade."



To lighten the ranch workload, Nuckolls shipped his calf crop to Paul Miller of Miller Cattle and Feedyards, Torrington, Wyo.

Just the same, this kind of quality grade and brand acceptance put a lot of daylight between the Nuckolls cattle and industry averages. One might assume that the rancher had spent hour upon hour studying expected progeny differences (EPDs) and pedigrees to propagate the genetic elixir that the numbers reveal.

Not so, Nuckolls says. "I don't really follow bloodlines much."

Naming a few from the list of several

Angus breeders in the area, Nuckolls modestly describes his genetic selection in saying, "We just try to keep productive cattle."

But Miller is quick to add credence to the rancher's knowledge.

"He may not have planned it by following specific genetics; but it goes back to being a good stockman," Miller says. "He knows good stock, and it shows

*(Continued on page 56)*



Nuckolls (left) worked with Christine and Paul Miller to produce a set of steers that made 94% choice with 33% CAB®

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## No Time for Trouble *(from page 55)*

when he keeps his replacements or looks at bulls that he wants to lease.”

As a CAB feedlot partner, Miller Cattle and Feedyards sent carcass data back to the ranch along with the feeding performance data. Nuckolls intends to get some good out of it, to sharpen his genetics. “Going forward, it certainly will be a great asset,”

he says. “A lot of breeders have been able to identify the genetics that have the growth and the marbling that we sure need to look at.”

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## Perfecting a product

As nicely as this newfound partnership played out, it wasn't perfect — yet. Miller outlines an area that could be changed. “We had a 1% death loss on the steers and 2% on the heifers,” he says. “There's room for improvement there, but that's why we're working together to change some vaccinations at branding this year.”

During a mid-September visit to the ranch, Miller met Jw and Thea at their door with a cooler full of vaccine in tow.

“Jw visited with me about what we would recommend for a vaccination program on those calves,” Miller says. “I got to talking to him about a new vaccine that our vet had recommended. I thought it would work awfully well on those calves, so I mentioned it and he liked the sound of it.”

As far as Nuckolls is concerned, the feedlot's management and diverse services exceed his expectations.

“I've been really pleased with it. They've filled a void that we couldn't handle because we don't have the time to dedicate to it,” Nuckolls says. “I've really appreciated their expertise and the way they've handled our livestock. It didn't take long to figure out that Paul had a good eye for cattle, so I'm really comfortable with that.”

Working together to get better results is more than practical. It's just a new way to look at a basic Western tradition.

