

New manual guides stocker-backgrounders to quality

by **LAURA NELSON,**
CAB industry information specialist

When it comes to beef quality, the stocker industry is sometimes considered oblivious, or driven only by pounds. But market dynamics have continued to build the case that quality matters to these entrepreneurs, and, of course, they matter in any discussion of beef quality.

That's why Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) recently published its *Best Practices Manual* (BPM) for stocker operators and backgrounders, a guide to targeting the *Certified Angus Beef*® brand.

"The stocker segment has historically been considered a low-cost, margin

operator," says Mark McCully, CAB assistant vice president for supply. "The reality is they have a huge influence on end-product merit, and those best management practices need to be identified and kept in mind."

The BPM highlights strategies that guide stockers to maximize profit and quality. "It covers everything from genetics to cattle procurement, from health and nutritional management to marketing. All of these areas are critical to the bottom line as well as product quality," McCully says.



Pfizer veterinarian Robin Falkner says the booklet doesn't just give producers tools to improve their animals; it opens their minds to new ideas.

"This publication raises the stocker's awareness that what he does matters down the production line," Falkner says, noting they are often farmers or grassland managers first and beef producers second.

"A lot of stocker operators are simply looking to turn grass into gain. But they could be part of a more elegant system that allows them to capture additional values in a branded beef program like CAB while doing that," he says.

Filling a void

McCully says there has been a "knowledge void" on management practices to help stockers capture that value, which led to the development of the stocker BPM. The stocker industry is changing, and its producers need more information.

"We're moving from a commodity stocker industry where every 750-pound (lb.) yearling is worth 80¢ to an industry where some of them are going to be worth a dollar, some 60¢, and some may be unmarketable," Falkner points out. "This is the type of manual that starts opening people's minds to how they can

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make sure their cattle are those desirable ones.”

The manual breaks down each production step that affects just how desirable those cattle will be in a quality-driven market. Greg Highfill knows the stocker industry has a unique set of needs and challenges. The Oklahoma State University beef cattle specialist says BPM serves as a practical tool to meet those challenges.

“The *Best Practices Manual* addresses the issues that reduce stress, while improving health and production efficiency,” he says. “Those things come together to yield a higher-quality end product.”

Stockers are often challenged to take calves from diverse backgrounds and improve them for a profit. This often means straightening out health and dealing with weaning stress, Highfill says. “The manual does a nice job of addressing weaning and the stress that comes with putting cattle together from different backgrounds. It helps identify ways of treating them that will improve stocker health and addresses appropriate animal handling guidelines.”

Another beef cattle specialist says the manual gives stockers a condensed but information-packed guide to “understanding how everything from nutrition to implanting to sourcing their cattle affects quality grade and CAB acceptance.” Justin Rhinehart, Mississippi State University, says the manual’s discussion on growth implants outlines practical and applicable information on how different products affect quality.

The BPM also addresses marketing ideas that affect production profits. Highfill says it’s a tool that increases information sharing between cow-calf producers, stockers and feedlots, which lets each segment reap the benefits of better management.

Rhinehart points to the CAB Feeder Calf Value-Discovery System as an

important marketing tool. “Everyone should know by now that if we do all these management practices and then sell them as commodity cattle, we’re just backing up,” he says. “Utilizing the marketing tips in the manual is so key.”

For all of its great information, cattlemen must still customize the BPM to maximize its use, Falkner says.

“While there are a lot of people who

will look at this manual for answers, the really astute stocker cattlemen are going to look at this to get better questions,” he says. “It’s a thought-provoking starting point that asks, ‘Is my operation where it needs to be? How do we need to manage cattle for better quality? What do I need to be aware of in the future that I haven’t been in the past?’ Every answer is not in there, but there is enough to stimulate

the thinking that will ask the right questions.”

To start asking these questions in your business, e-mail Marilyn Conley at mconley@certifiedangusbeef.com, or call 1-800-225-2333 to order your free copy of the *Best Practices Manual* for stockers and backgrounders.



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