

More than Gain

A focus on health as well as gain keeps Eric Williamson's niche market stocker clients coming back.



As a natural beef stocker, cattle health is high on Eric Williamson's priority list.

Story & photos by
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Wheat planted in late summer makes Eric Williamson's off-season stocker program work.



In today's economy, offering mediocre service is a ticket to failure. The business of feeding stocker cattle is no exception, and that is why Eric Williamson of George, Wash., pays close attention to the specific needs of his clients.

"Most of our customers are in natural feed programs," he says. "They expect us to keep their cattle healthy."

This is no small task for Williamson. As director of Williamson Farms he is responsible for the welfare of 3,000-5,000 stockers every year.

While criteria among natural beef programs do vary, almost all include a total prohibition on the use of antibiotics, growth hormones and animal byproducts in the feed.

"This works well for cattle on those programs because most of the animals we receive are put on grass pasture," he says. "Our customers

tell us that animals grown on pasture grass remain healthier and are less likely to require antibiotics."

Eric notes that his stocker clients are also well aware of the advantages of wintering their animals in the Northwest rather than subjecting them to the stress associated with a long-distance haul south. This is particularly true for animals in a natural beef program that are not allowed to receive antibiotics.

"We have our grass available when your typical cow-calf producer in the Northwest doesn't have a lot of feed for his animals," he says, adding that most stocker cattle are received in the fall and are out by late spring.

This doesn't mean that his clients are not serious about weight gain, Williamson says. "If we weren't consistently producing good gains, our customers wouldn't send their cattle here," he says. "They have a lot invested in their cattle, and they want to get them to finish as soon as possible."

From arrival to departure,

Williamson expects to see an average daily gain (ADG) of 2 pounds (lb.). “Sometimes it is tough in January or February, but that is usually the average gain of a calf over the time it is with us,” he says.

Two crops better than one

Because the Williamsons raise irrigated crops in the summer on much of the land that is occupied by feeders in the winter, vegetable crop residue plays an important part in their stocker operation.

“Since we farm in the summer we have lots of crop residues that make very good feed, like sweet-corn stocks,” Eric says. “We also grow lima beans and green peas and harvest some of those residues for supplemental feeding at receiving and shipping times or when the weather gets bad.”

If there is a single element that makes the Williamson stocker operation work, it is optimum land utilization, Eric says.

“Since we grow mostly vegetables, a lot of them are short-seasoned. This allows us to plant a winter wheat right after harvest,” he says, adding that by planting a winter grain in August, grazing is assured from October through May. “We usually put the cattle out in the sweet-corn residue until the wheat is ready.”

As a forage, winter wheat is hard to beat, Eric says. “It can produce 3 pounds of gain a day in the spring. Then in June, after we get the cattle off, we do a chemical burn down and then no-till in a late-season vegetable crop.”

Eric admits that Williamson Farms, with its 12-month utilization of farm ground, is unique in the Northwest. “There are stocker operations who use crop ground to graze animals in the winter, but they usually rent it from farmers,” he says. “With our situation we are the farmers.”

Legacy of change

For the Williamsons, running a large vegetable operation in the summer and a sizable stocker operation the rest of the year did not occur by happenstance. Eric’s great-grandfather started as a dryland cattle rancher in the 1920s. With the completion of the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project, many landowners who previously raised beef turned to raising higher-value vegetable crops. The Williamsons were no exception. By 1970 they were out of the cattle business, choosing instead to grow row crops for local canneries and alfalfa hay for dairies and export.

In 2002 that changed again when Eric’s father, Jerry, personally became interested in the nutritional aspects of grass-fed beef. This, in turn, led to a consensus among those engaged in running the Williamson operation that there was a growing demand for the product in cities like Seattle. “We could see some retail opportunities for grass-finished beef,” Eric recalls. “We thought it was worth a try.”

What the Williamsons soon discovered when they started their cow-calf operation was how little information

was available on raising and finishing beef on grass. The knowledge Eric’s great-grandfather possessed was long gone, and, as an industry, grass-finished beef production was still in its infancy.

A new perspective

Eric notes that one major barrier to raising cattle start-to-finish on grass in the Northwest was the short grazing season

associated with the region’s perennial grasses. Even with a blend of cold- and warm-season grasses raised on irrigation, it was unlikely that animals could be pastured beyond the half-year point.

Putting up hay in the summer and feeding it through the winter was possible, but that would involve additional labor and expense. Such an endeavor would also compete directly for acreage with their

already established summer vegetable production.

As Eric explains, the answer for their all-grass starter herd lay in their cow-calf pairs grazing on traditional perennial pasture in the summer.

“We usually work out a trade arrangement with local ranchers who can accommodate our cattle so we can

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farm our fields over the summer,” he says, adding that the rest of the year the Williamson herd remains at home consuming crop residue and annual grains planted for winter grazing.

Eric admits that when compared to their farming and stocker businesses the Williamson cow-calf operation is small,

but he is optimistic about its future. Last year their on-farm commercial herd of primarily Angus cattle produced 150 calves born, raised and finished on Williamson grass. The objective of Williamson Farms is not only to produce carcasses for wholesale and retail clients in Western Washington, but also to improve the

grazing characteristics within the herd.

“In that area we are feeling like we are making some real progress,” Eric says. “We were able to ship a load of completely grass cattle at 14 months old this last year.”

He adds that the cattle were born in April 2008, and they were shipped the first part of June with weights ranging from

1,100 to 1,200 lb. per animal. “The guy that bought them was very happy with the carcass quality,” Eric recalls.

Unique expertise

While raising a smaller-framed steer that can fill out more rapidly on grass than the animals developed for the feedlot, Eric has come to believe that much of what makes grass feeding work can be traced back directly to how, what and when an animal is exposed to quality grass.

If there is a single element that makes the Williamson stocker operation work, it is optimum land utilization, Eric says.

“If you can have your system timed to where your cattle are capable of the greatest gain when you have the greatest supply of quality grass — for us that is in the spring,” he says, “then it is really pretty easy to finish cattle on grass.”

For Eric, the knowledge he has acquired about feeding grass to cattle has not only proved useful in developing Williamson Farms’ commercial herd, but it has proved invaluable in helping build their highly successful stocker operation.

“Much of what I have learned about raising grass-finished beef can be applied to our customers’ natural beef cattle,” he says.

Ryan Steele, an associate with Country Natural Beef, one of Williamson Farms’ oldest stocker clients, is quick to point out that working with a stocker who really understands how to get the most out of grazing cattle is a real asset to their program’s member base.



“The Williamsons let us know what size of cattle work best on what feed,” Steele says. “Some feed might be too hot for lighter animals, so that understanding is valuable and can prevent some digestive problems from occurring later.”

Steele adds that maintaining the health of each animal delivered is of particular importance to its owner because Country Natural Beef is a cooperative of 120 small and medium-sized ranches, none of whose operators can afford the loss in today’s economy. At the same time, an affected operator has limited options if his animal is forced out of the program for health reasons.

“If a calf is given an antibiotic, it is out of the program and will probably go to the local sale barn as another generic animal,” he says. “Whatever the market is that week is what that rancher gets.”

A system that works

Eric Williamson is well-aware of the financial consequences of sick calves in a natural beef program and has developed a set of protocols that he believes minimize an animal’s health risk. “When we first started selling our own grass-finished beef, our customers wanted a natural product,” Eric recalls. “We really felt we were taking a risk because we were used to doing a lot of treatments.”

He adds that at the time he didn’t realize that by pasturing calves through their first six months and then using a low-stress weaning technique, a good portion of the battle was already won.

“We now ask that any cattle we receive be weaned for 30 days,” says Eric, adding that nose buds and fenceline weaning seems to work the best. “On our own cattle we felt that the nose buds added 50 pounds to our calves last year.”

For Eric, a big part of keeping illness to a minimum in a stocker herd relates directly to stress management. All his receiving people use the Bud Williams low-stress handling techniques, and animals that do not respond well to

humans are segregated into a higher-risk category.

“We have a neighbor who is great with a cutting horse,” he says. “We send a batch of them over everyday. He works them back and forth, and that seems to gentle them down.”

Once an animal has been acclimated,

Williamson follows up with a robust vaccination regimen that includes a spectrum of minerals with special attention paid to those known to be deficient in the Columbia Basin. He adds that a high percentage of cattle are brought back in three weeks for a booster.

“With our current health program,

typically, out of 2,500 cattle coming through this place in a year we might lose one or two and maybe have to treat 10 to 15,” Eric says. “We are told that those are good numbers for animals on a natural beef program.”



Eric Williamson relies on wheat pasture to feed his winter stockers.