

Headed in the Right Direction

The last time corn was this expensive, the Washburns said goodbye to hogs. This time they say hello to top-quality beef.

Story by
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Mother Nature affects most everything tied to agriculture. Weather can ruin a hay crop,

branding day or feedlot performance. It can also have a positive influence on everything from calf health to calf prices.

For James Washburn and his son Tony, a wet spring accelerated plans

to increase the number of cows in their herd near King City, Mo.

Before Tony came back to the farm in 1992, the cattle operation took a back seat to hogs and crops. The team had already decided

to phase out the pork enterprise when an unusually wet year in 1995 hastened its dispersal.

"We had been feeding a lot of \$4- and \$5-per-bushel corn to finish the hogs out," Tony says. "We didn't plant an acre of corn in 1995, because the first time we went to the field was June 17. We didn't repopulate and didn't get back into pigs at all. We just started increasing the cattle."

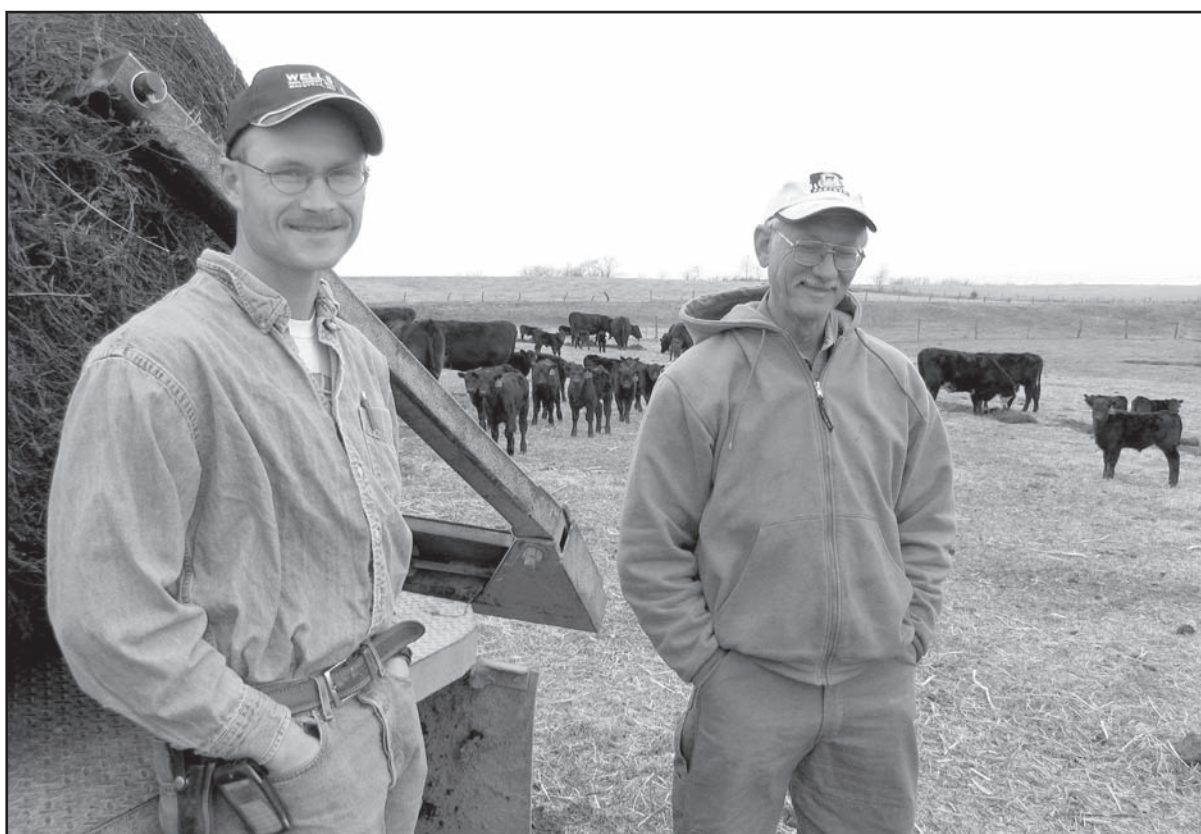
The 100-head herd grew larger and split into spring- and fall-calving groups that now add up to 550 females, including embryo transfer (ET) recipients and cows taken in on shares.

"Some people want to own cows but need somebody to take care of them," Tony says. "We provide the labor and all the feed, and they provide the cows."

Two years ago, the Washburns began working with a handful of seedstock producers on ET programs. The breeders buy back their calves out of the Washburns' ET cows, selected from productive cows more than 7 years old.

"It's a good premium price on the bull and heifer calves, but there is also a built-in floor, so we know the minimum we're going to get," James says. "It's a favorable situation."

Using a synchronization system, Tony artificially inseminates (AIs) the rest of the herd.



For James Washburn (right) and his son Tony, a wet spring accelerated plans to increase the cow numbers in their herd near King City, Mo.



The Washburns' 100-head herd grew larger and split into spring- and fall-calving groups that now add up to 550 females, including embryo transfer (ET) recipients and cows taken in on shares. [PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER]

"AI takes a lot of time, but I think in the end product you're getting paid for that," he says.

Care at the ranch

The Washburns started finishing their calves 10 years ago. The first year they used an Extension steer feed-out program, so they know just how much the extra value adds up.

"We realized we had been selling some quality that we weren't getting paid for," James says. "The next year we did it again and were in the process of getting into AI. We realized every year the calves off of our heifers were the ones that were hanging the best carcasses and making the most money."

That's when they decided to start feeding all their calves. The Washburns

now partner with Gregory Feedlots of Tabor, Iowa, each year.

"They aren't just feeding cattle. They are feeding cattle to produce meat," Tony says.

The Washburn cattle typically gain 3.5-4 pounds (lb.) per day until they make 80%-90% Choice. Up to 45% qualify for the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand, but the producers aren't stopping there.

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"You get more uniform calves — not strung out — if you're synchronizing and AIing," he says. The heifers are given 30-45 days to become pregnant and the cows up to 60. "If you keep them tight as heifers, it's easier to keep them tightly grouped as cows," Tony notes.

Their fall herd of some 150 gives the 2- to 5-year-olds a second chance if they don't fit into those spring breeding windows.

The Washburns have begun to AI heifers for others in the northwest Missouri area and will even calve them out for a price.

"We're handling a bunch of them anyway, and this helps pay for it," Tony says. The farm sells bred heifers, too.

"A lot of the bigger producers don't like to hassle with retaining their own heifers, so they know they've got a source of them here," he says. "We have repeat buyers year after year."

Few commercial cow-calf producers use AI as much as Tony and James, but they are confident it is right for their goals.

"We've got our heifers on a 30-day calving season, and our cows are basically on 40 days," James says.

"We couldn't do that without AI or an excessive amount of expensive bull power. There's no way I can afford to own a bull as good as what I can buy a straw of semen from."

Tony knows there's extra work, but he says it's worth it.

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“Our main emphasis now is to increase that quality grade,” Tony says. “The cattle are big enough, they grow well enough; now we just need to step up the marbling.”

A little change can go a long way.

“If we concentrate on our marbling EPDs (expected progeny differences) — if we jump up that half step — we’ll put a lot

of those low-Choice into CAB and a lot of high-Choice into Prime,” he says. “That’s what we’re striving for.”

All of that must start with care at the ranch.

“Early weaning has helped take the nutritional demands off the cows,” Tony says. “Come August, when it’s hot and dry,

they aren’t trying to dump milk out to their calves.”

Calves from their spring herd are born in March, sent to the feedlot in August, and harvested in February and March.

“All of that plays into our early weaning, getting them going on creep and getting them ready to go to Iowa,” he says.

“Everything has worked really good for everybody in that situation.”

The creep-to-weaning ration is primarily made up of soyhull pellets, which are usually cost-effective and palatable without compromising forage digestion in the rumen, Tony says.

“At weaning, the calves are used to eating them,” he says. “You dump them in the bunk, and they all come to the bunk and eat.”

Weaning is usually done by the end of June or early July, depending on Mother Nature.

“We try to be flexible, so that we have a good three or four days through the bawling period of good weather,” Tony says. Success, he says, comes from the setup of five- to six-acre pastures and plumbing tapped into the rural water district.

“When your younger ones are doing better than your 5- to 7-year-olds, it looks like you’re headed in the right direction.”

— *Tony Washburn*

Ounce of prevention

Preventative measures to keep the calves healthy encourage gains and grade.

“We give modified-live vaccine religiously, everywhere, all the time,” Tony says. “The cows have had it forever, and we’ve never had a problem.”

Since they’re already running the cows through a chute 30-60 days after calving, the Washburns work the calves then, too.

“All of that works with the AI program,” Tony says. “If we weren’t in that kind of a program, I don’t know what we’d be able to take the time to do.”

They get two more boosters in between the initial shot and their shipping date.

“At the feedlot, it’s about 35 days after arrival before they bring them in to weigh individually,” he says. “They’ll re-treat them and put their growth implant in at that time.”

After six to seven months in the Iowa feedlot, the Washburns finally learn what kind of improvement they’ve made for the year.

“Consistently, our heifers’ calves in the feedlot are the best quality grade, and a lot of times they’re the best-gaining,” Tony says. “When your younger ones are doing better than your 5- to 7-year-olds, it looks like you’re headed in the right direction.”

Corn, haylage, silage and alfalfa are still grown on the Missouri farm, but cattle working facilities have long since replaced the hog sheds. It was Mother Nature’s push that spurred them to a deeper involvement in the beef industry, but the Washburns have kept the cattle enterprise going, growing and improving since then.