

Long-term solution sets stage for

Long-Term Success

Story & photos by
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In 1977 Allen Beer's calves were getting slammed at the stockyard. "Nobody wanted those Santa Gertrudis-cross cattle. We were getting docked \$15 to \$20 a hundredweight (cwt.)," says Beer, a Richburg, S.C., producer.

The solution, provided by the late Robert Vaughn, former area livestock Extension agent, was to combine the calves from Beer's operation with those of his neighbors' and market them as a truckload. Twenty-six years later, that one load of "Gert" calves has mushroomed into 15 truckloads of mostly Angus-cross calves, marketed on the first Thursday of each September by the Tri-County Marketing Association. The handful of producers has grown into a group of about 30 consignors — and buyers do want the calves.

"I talked to Robert Vaughn and he said they were taking smaller producers like me and grouping their calves together for truckload lots," says Edgemoor, S.C., producer David Wilson. "I felt like we could do better than selling at the sale barn. We did do better. I've sold \$700 calves."

Granted, that was in 2001 — his best year since he started selling cattle through Tri-County sales in 1985. Still, the long-term numbers are positive.

"The cattle in the Tri-County sales bring 2¢ to 5¢ over single-head sales, depending on the year and cattle prices," says Rusty Thompson, a recently retired area Extension agent.

"We've certainly seen a lot of data that indicates truckload lot sizes on feeder calves garner premiums versus either single-head sales or smaller pens," agrees Ted Schroeder, Kansas State University (K-State) ag economist. "The premium is usually \$3 to \$5 a hundredweight for the optimal truckload lot."

Truckload lots of quality calves aren't the only draw for buyers. Complete vaccination and preconditioning programs are mandatory. However, single-source truckloads sold off the farm are the

exception to the preconditioning rule.

"Preconditioning is very much a plus in merchandising these cattle," says Lemmy Wilson, a Newport, Tenn., marketing agent who has been selling the Tri-County cattle since 1984. "They come nearer [to]

getting what their cattle are worth."

"We are seeing more and more of these types of sales," Schroeder says. "That means there is a demand for truckload lots of preconditioned cattle."

Better management

Producers say the benefits of selling through Tri-County go beyond an annual paycheck. "One of the things it did was get us all working toward marketing the cattle — the timing of our

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Richburg, S.C., producer Allen Beer doesn't have enough calves to put together a truckload of his own.



David Wilson uses Angus bulls on his Simmental and Charolais-cross cows.

Cream of the crop

With 170 cows, Keith McDonald has almost enough steers to sell a truckload on his own, but his numbers meant he couldn't do much sorting for uniformity and quality.

Allen Beer has 70 cows, so he isn't close to that magic number to fill a truckload. But his calves, like McDonald's, are Angus-Gelbvieh crosses and are on similar breeding and calving seasons. Both also sell through upstate South Carolina's Tri-County Marketing Association sale.

In 1991 the producers and friends decided to mix and match to get the best of both their herds.

"We use the best-looking, most uniform calves," McDonald says.

If you have visions of the steers from both herds madly milling about during sorting, that's not the case. First, the producers get 205-day weights and sort them on paper. After weaning and a 45-day preconditioning period, Beer sorts out his best steers, preferably those weighing within 150 pounds (lb.) of each other.

Using the same weight range, McDonald sorts out his best.

On sale day for the Tri-County Association, the truck picks up Beer's cattle, then goes to McDonald's to complete the load.

Quality calves that didn't fit the weight range for McDonald's and Beer's load are combined with other loads at the gathering point for the other Tri-County sale calves, or they are sent to the feedlot through the Quest program, the state feedout trial.

"I can put together a better load using Allen's calves," McDonald says. "We've built a reputation for our calves."

"I know I get a little more for my calves selling our own load," Beer says. "Even in our small sale, buyers adjust the price down for multiple producer loads. One or two producers in a load works well, though."



Allen Beer (left) and Keith McDonald pick the best steers out of their herds and combine them into a truckload lot for sale.

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Blackstock, S.C., cattleman Keith McDonald says he can put together a better load by using Allen Beer's calves, too.



"I just flat out had several people who were marketing our calves tell me to get the red calves out. Any time I sit down and look at what we started with, I don't want to get away from Angus."

— Keith McDonald

breeding seasons and our management practices," Beer says. "The purpose of the program was to get smaller producers on a similar program so we could market truckload lots."

The preconditioning program is a prime example. Now producers time their breeding and calving seasons so the calves are ready to be weaned in July, giving them at least 45 days before the sale. In addition to giving their immune systems time to rebound from the stress of weaning, the calves are introduced to feedbunks, mixed rations and water troughs.

"There are a lot of benefits to preconditioning you can't put a dollar value on," Beer says. "It helps rest your pastures, and it gives the cows more time to prepare for their next calf."

"Preconditioning pays because of the weight gain," says Keith McDonald, a producer from Blackstock, S.C. His calves normally gain 100 pounds (lb.) or more between weaning and shipping.

"I don't think I could sell in truckload lots if I didn't precondition," he adds. "We have two smaller herds and two main herds. It would be hard to get them gathered up."

"These preconditioned calves work so easy, it is amazing," David says.

"There is no bawling." He goes out early the morning the trucks are due, pens his calves and takes them to the central gathering point for screening, sorting and pooling with the other producers' calves. By noon, the calves are ready to be loaded.

Better calves

An increase in the quality of their cattle is another bonus.

"There is a slow, constant improvement in their herds," Thompson observes. He started as Vaughn's assistant, then took over the area Extension duties after Vaughn's death in 1988. "These guys really push to improve."

Referring to a state feedout trial, he adds, "Most people in Tri-County are involved with the Quest program."

With Quest, producers pool calves from their herds and send them to custom feeders in southwest Iowa. In turn the producers get complete feedlot and carcass data on their cattle.

"I've seen quite a bit of improvement in their cattle since I've been working with them," Lemmy comments. "They are constantly looking at the way the industry is going and buying bulls to meet those needs."

"I used to just buy bulls," David says.



Keith McDonald has watched the quality and weights go up on his cattle since he has been marketing through South Carolina's Tri-County Marketing Association sale.

"Now we look at the EPDs (expected progeny differences) and buy them through the Clemson Bull Test or go to good seedstock people."

The bulls he buys for his 60 Charolais-, Simmental- and Angus-cross cows are all Angus. "Angus calves are a lot easier to precondition because of their dispositions," David says.

He adds, "Tri-County has gotten mostly black. The black calves do bring a dollar or two more."

"I just flat out had several people who were marketing our calves tell me to get the red calves out," McDonald says.

"Any time I sit down and look at what we started with, I don't want to get away from Angus."

McDonald also sends a sample of his Angus-Gelbvieh calves to Quest. "We want to put something in the feedlot that will grade. When we first started retaining ownership, we had good growth and yield grades, but were weakest in the areas that can be improved with Angus."

Not that growth has suffered.

"We sold our first cattle through the Tri-County sale in '85," McDonald says. "There were 160 calves, steers and heifers, and they averaged 487 pounds. This past year we sold 68 steers and they averaged 725 pounds."

Along with increasing prices and weights through genetics and management, the Tri-County members also invest sweat equity. While Lemmy or his agents, along with Extension and state department of agriculture employees, do the screening and sorting, association members man the gates and pen the cattle.

"It is not easy to do what we do," Beer says. "Everybody has to take a day or two off. But I'm proud to be a part of an organization that cooperates like this one."

He adds, "Robert always talked about adding value to our cattle. In hindsight, you really have to admire his vision."

McDonald adds, "There were producers willing to grab on to that vision."

