

# One for All All for One

*How a group of small-scale producers gained clout in the cattle market.*

Story by  
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When Brett Stratton took over his grandfather's 60-cow beef herd 10 years ago, the young cattleman from Appomattox County, Va., decided to join the Buckingham Cattlemen's Association (BCA). This 20-year-old organization was formed in southern Virginia to help small-scale producers market their calves.

"I'd heard great things about the Buckingham Cattlemen's Association, and I knew we needed to change some management practices. Although I had helped my grandfather with the farm for several years, I didn't know much about the cattle business," says Stratton, who was 24 years old when he took over the cattle. "Joining the Buckingham County Cattlemen has turned out to be a good decision."

To meet the needs of its members, BCA has changed

steadily during the past 10 years to remain on the cutting edge of beef production. In addition to organizing a quality-assured feeder calf sale, the association coordinates a large-scale artificial insemination (AI) program and holds annual replacement heifer sales.

Before joining the association, Brett and his father, Bill Stratton, met with Jim Myers. At that time, Myers was the Extension educator in Buckingham County and helped organize the BCA. After retirement, Myers has continued to work as executive director of the association. He helped the Strattons form a management plan for the family's Evergreen Farm based on requirements for BCA's cattle sales.

#### **Profit at the sale barn**

Brett's first step was to switch from year-round calving to a 60-day breeding season. At the same time, Stratton began using Angus bulls on the Hereford-Gelbvieh crossbred



The Buckingham Cattlemen's Association was formed 20 years ago in southern Virginia to help small-scale producers market their calves. (PHOTO COURTESY MARK DAVIS)

cows that he bought from his grandfather. For 10 years, Brett has saved replacement heifers and has gradually built a herd of 200 Angus-sired females.

Brett also participates in the Buckingham Cattlemen's AI breeding program. Each year, the association accepts bids from AI companies and awards the AI work (including semen) for hundreds of cows to the winning bidder. As they consider the bids, Myers and a committee of BCA members select AI sires with balanced traits for low birth weight, growth, carcass quality and milking ability for their daughters. Most of the cleanup bulls are sons of the same Angus sire used in the year's AI program.

By bidding as a group, BCA has achieved a cost of less than \$25 per cow for the AI, including synchronization inputs.

In December 2004, 15 members of BCA AI'd 1,500 commercial females to a single top-quality Angus bull. In August 2006, 59 of the steer calves were sorted into a truckload and sold on the Virginia Cattlemen's Association teleauction. The uniform steers averaged 840 pounds (lb.) and brought \$1.16 per lb. Steers in this weight range averaged \$1.09 per lb. at other sales across Virginia that week.

Because of group purchasing power, the cost of synchronization and AI for the Buckingham cattlemen was \$23 per cow, and the AI-sired steers brought \$59 per head more than similar animals sold that week. The package of practices used by BCA producers helped that load of cattle earn an extra \$3,481.

Each BCA calf is also identified with an electronic ear tag and is source-verified. The cattle are

## **Recipe for success**

The Buckingham Cattlemen's Association (BCA) uses the following practices to top the market:

- estrus synchronization
- artificial insemination
- 60-day breeding season
- short calving period
- uniform calf crop
- vaccinated, weaned and preconditioned calves
- source verification
- individual identification with electronic ear tags

On sale day (always the first Monday of August) the cattle are sold in truckload lots of similar weights and the same sex.

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[PHOTO COURTESY MARK DAVIS]



years. During this time, Buckingham’s quality-assured feeder cattle sales have averaged \$4-\$6 per hundredweight (cwt.) over other graded sales in Virginia the same week, McKinnon says. In August 2006, Buckingham’s feeder calf sale averaged \$10 per cwt. over other graded sales in Virginia that week.

“Over the years, the Buckingham cattlemen have developed a reputation for cattle with consistent health and growth. Because I’ve seen how well it works, I’ve tried to export their way of producing and marketing cattle to other areas of the state,” says McKinnon, who is now executive secretary of the Virginia Cattlemen’s Association.

Replacement heifer sales have been a particularly bright spot for BCA members. In 2006, BCA members sold 135 commercial bred heifers that averaged \$1,350 per head. The heifers are managed according to requirements of the Virginia Premium Assured Heifer Program and are ultrasound scanned. A veterinarian uses

ultrasound to determine the sex of the fetuses. Heifers carrying female fetuses received the highest bids in 2006.

Lin Jones of Buckingham County is one of the association’s long-time members who has benefited for many years from the AI program and the successful sales. Jones has been a member of the association for 20 years, but he’s most enthusiastic about changes made by the association during the past eight years.

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Jones points out that the association’s AI program uses “curve-bender” bulls — sires with expected progeny differences (EPDs) for low birth weights and high yearling weights. Because of high-accuracy EPDs for low birth weight, Jones and

other cattlemen are willing to breed heifers as well as cows to the curve-bender sires.

Some of Jones’ neighbors poke fun at him for spending so much time and effort on AI breeding and managing his cattle for the BCA sale. “But they sell calves for \$600 (per head) and I receive over \$800 (per head) for my calves,” says Jones with a laugh.

For Jim Myers, the reward for years of work with the cattlemen comes on sale day. Myers doesn’t own any cattle but he enjoys walking down the sale barn alleyway and looking at the pens of healthy, uniform calves waiting for top bids.

“I like to see how far this group of cattlemen has come,” Myers says. “This really is one for all and all for one.”



vaccinated, preconditioned and source-verified so all of the credit for high sale prices doesn’t go to AI genetics. But AI-sired calves seem to capture the attention of buyers, says Buckingham County Extension educator Mark Davis.

“AI-estrus synchronization really benefits most producers, even those with 20 to 40 cows,” Davis points out. “It helps them tighten their calving seasons and produce uniform calves.”

### Proven profit

Former Virginia Extension economist Bill McKinnon has followed the progress of the Buckingham cattlemen for many

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[PHOTO COURTESY OF BRETT STRATTON]