Three Herds Better Than One

Above: John Carter started an AI program to improve the genetics in his herd. Then he expanded the program to his father's and friend's herds.

Virginia producers share work, expenses and herd improvement with AI.

Story & photos by **BECKY MILLS**

After one year of artificially inseminating (AIing) both his cows and heifers, John Carter was determined to do it again, even though he had to juggle breeding chores around his full-time job. His friend and nearby producer Kenny Thomas also wanted to AI his heifers, but his job of fighting forest fires frequently takes him out of town during breeding season. Their answer was to join forces and combine their heifers, as well as those from John's father, Bill, during breeding season.

"That way I've got help, and John has help," Thomas says.

This past breeding season, Carter ended up with nine of Thomas' heifers, two of his father's, and 15 of his own.

Carter's operation is the logical choice for the group-breeding program. He has the most accessible working facilities and a semen tank.

"You always take a chance on messing up a tank when you move it," Thomas says. "I pay for my own semen and help out on the cost of maintenance with John's."

Thomas also supplies the hay, helps Carter work his cattle, and helps haul and market his cull cows. In return, he says, "This way I know my heifers are going to be taken care of no matter what."

Carter and his cousin, Charlie, do the actual breeding and Carter does the feeding. All three Jonesville, Va., heifer owners chip in at synchronization and breeding time.

For his part, Carter says he's glad to share the benefits of AI with his father and friend. "We want to improve the genetics of our cow herd, and this is the most economical way we can do it with the size [of] herds we have. Plus, we can follow the market trends easier with AI."

With AI they are able to custom match semen to their heifers to meet their individual goals. "We used semen from six different bulls," Thomas remarks.

Burt Redinger, manager of nearby DeBusk Angus, is helping the producers match up heifers and, in Carter's case, cows to bulls. "He was super helpful," Carter comments.

Carter says he is mainly going for an efficient, frame score 5, 1,100-lb. cow in his Angus-based

Synchronization works around work

Even though John and Bill Carter and Kenny Thomas join forces to artificially inseminate (AI) their heifers, all three still have full-time jobs to schedule around. Their solution is a timed-AI synchronization protocol set up by Tennessee veterinarian Edwin Robertson, a veteran in embryo transfer (ET).

"We've used timed AI for eight years now," Robertson says. "This has been the most effective protocol for getting the most heifers and cows pregnant."

Here's the schedule:

- **Day 0,** 8 p.m. Inject GnRH, 2 cc
  Insert CIDR®
- **Day 7, 8 p.m.** Inject prostaglandin, 5 cc
  Remove CIDR
- **Day 9, 8 p.m.** Inject GnRH, 2 cc
- **Day 10, 8 a.m.** Breed

Robertson says the treatments can be started in the morning, but the nighttime schedule worked better for the Carters and Thomas.

"Make sure it is 48 hours after the Day 7 treatment," Robertson says.

"Make sure this is 10 to 12 hours after the Day 9 treatment," Robertson says.

Before you even start to think about a synchronization and AI program, Robertson says, you need to have your heifers and cows in the right condition.

"We're reluctant to breed heifers weighing less than 750 pounds," he explains. "I prefer they weigh 800 pounds and are at least 15 months old. Conception rates are usually lower on heifers under 15 months of age."

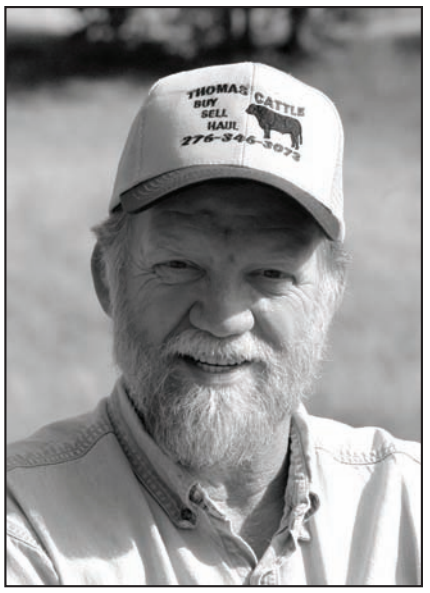
He adds, "Because of the hormone profile of heifers, in my opinion, anytime you attempt timed AI with heifers you will be disappointed unless you use a protocol that includes CIDRs."

Robertson says cows need to be in a body condition score (BCS) of at least 4 and up to a 6 (1 being emaciated and 9 being obese).

For best results he says they need to be at least 45 days postcalving when the synchronization program begins and 54 days postcalving at breeding.

"With cows in good flesh we can get conception rates on the low end in the 50s," Robertson says. "I have seen several good producers go up as high as the 70s."

"With heifers, we can see results consistent with those in cows."



Kenny Thomas takes his heifers to John Carter's operation so the two cattlemen can help each other with synchronization chores.

herd. "I marked my working chute, and as my cows came in I'd weigh them and get a frame score. It really surprised me. I had frame score 4 cows that weighed 1,200 pounds." He says the bulls they used also had favorable expected progeny differences (EPDs) for calving ease and milk.

In Thomas' case, he is after weaning weight, around a 700 lb. average, with his Continental-cross cows. "It is hard to get that with calving ease," Thomas says. So, he breeds his cows to one bull and uses semen from calving ease sires for his heifers. "This way I don't have to buy an Angus bull and keep him year-round to breed to eight or 10 heifers."

He did lease a calving ease bull for 45 days from local Angus breeder Chris Lawson for cleanup duties, but he still kept his heifer breeding season to 65 days and in budget.

Affordable genetics

"We could never afford to buy the genetics we're getting with AI," he says. "We bought semen for $12 a straw."

On the heifer side, Carter feels the practice is cost-effective. The first year, when he AI-bred only his own cattle, he had a conception rate of 60% on his heifers. That worked out to a cost of $42 for each pregnancy. His cows didn't do as well, and only 24% settled to AI, which bumped the cost up to $129 per pregnancy. "It was disheartening, but we bred right in the middle of a drought and heat."

This year, judging by the number that returned to heat, it looks like the conception rates on the cows and heifers is going to be in the 50% range.

Carter says there are costs other than the obvious ones. "It takes determination and a lot of effort. We run the cows through the chute four times at 8 [o'clock] at night so we can breed on Saturday morning."

But, there are benefits on top of getting a superior calf, he says. "AI really helps my heifers. It gets them used to being handled. You learn their dispositions and get to know them."

He adds, "It is helpful to have a set time to watch the heifers, to know when they are due to calve." Still, he adds, one of the biggest benefits is knowing he and his breeding partners are doing the best they can for their herds.

"It was exciting to see the calves on the ground and know we were a part of it," Carter says. "We want to be the best we can be."

John Carter and Kenny Thomas work together to improve the genetics of their herds through AI.