

Cattle Business in Mississippi – August 2010

“Stocker Cents” article

Choosing what Class of Cattle to Stocker

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Many different classes of cattle can be stockered. Prior to starting a stocker operation, it may be useful to visit with a stocker operator actively engaged in one of these enterprises to learn more about the potential challenges and rewards of that type of stockering. The management approach and resources needed differ depending on what classes of cattle are selected for the stocker operation.

High-risk Calves

High-risk calves might be young, lightweight calves (“peeweess”) or “mismanaged” calves. The “mismanaged” calves likely have not been castrated or dehorned, have not been administered a proper herd health program, and/or have not received adequate nutrition to support their genetic potential for growth. These calves are typically more susceptible to developing health problems and more challenging for which to develop effective nutritional programs. Comingling and acquiring calves from unknown sources with little or no documentation adds to the risk.

High-risk calves can often be purchased at discounted prices. There is typically a higher risk of losing money on these cattle but also a higher potential profit margin on these cattle. Potentially more head can be purchased and stockered for the same investment compared with larger, lower-risk calves.

Adequate receiving pens, stockering paddocks, hospital pens, cattle handling facilities, and veterinary oversight are critical to these types of operations. Persons working with high-risk calves must be adept at quickly identifying and treating sick animals. Nutritional programs must also be top-notch for producing acceptable weight gains and keeping calves healthy. Lighter, younger calves need higher diet nutrient densities than heavier, older calves. Compensatory gains must also be factored in to nutritional program planning for underweight calves.

Low-risk Calves

Low-risk calves are often older, heavier calves with a documented history of a good herd health program. These calves have generally been weaned for an extended period of time (at least 45 days) and are trained to eat from a feed bunk and drink from a water trough. Preconditioned calves are an example of low-risk calves. Source-, age-, and process-verified calves also fall into this category.

Premiums may be charged for low-risk calves. However, farm-direct purchases can provide economies from reduced shrink and marketing commissions. Premiums may also be justified by animal health savings, possible higher performance, and lower death

loss during the stocker period. Cattle from verification programs may also be able to continue in those programs after stockering.

Replacement Heifers

Replacement heifer development is a stockering form that can include commercial and/or purebred heifers. The goal of this type of program is to successfully develop heifers from weaning to breeding age and sometimes to first calving. Both on-farm and custom heifer development programs are an option. The Miss Premium Heifer Development Program is an example of a custom heifer development program where producers consign heifers to a custom development facility (often another producer's farm) and pay a development fee for specified services. These heifers then return to the original owner after the development phase is completed or are offered for sale at that time.

Managing weight gains to produce heifers that reach target breeding weights without becoming overly fleshy is important. Desired rate of gain is often in the 1.25 to 1.5 pounds per day range, but this depends upon the incoming weight, condition, age, and expected mature size of the heifer in combination with the time frame left until breeding. In addition, reproductive tract scores, pelvic measurements, and yearling data for reporting to breed associations (for purebred cattle) are sometimes measured during this development period. Some heifer development programs extend through a breeding season, so herd sires, breeding paddocks, and possibly artificial insemination program needs must be supplied and managed in these instances.

Developing Bulls

Purebred producers may not think of themselves as stocker operators, but developing weaned bulls to breeding ages is a form of stockering. This includes both on-farm and centralized bull testing programs. Post-weaning bull development is often done on the same seedstock cow-calf operation on which the bulls are born. It involves use of proper nutritional and health programs similar to other stockering enterprises. Not all seedstock bull calves weaned should be stockered with the goal of developing them to be herd sires. Some bulls should be castrated as soon as they are identified as culls and then directed towards traditional feeder calf stockering or finishing programs.

The rate of gain needed for bulls stockered as potential breeding stock is typically quite high compared to other stocker enterprises, often in excess of 3 pounds per head per day and sometimes over 5 pounds per head per day. Target weaning and yearling weights help direct desired weight gains. Bull development programs also differ from stockering programs utilizing commercial cattle in that yearling data collection for reporting to breed associations is a vital part of the development plan.

Market Cows and Bulls

Market cows and bulls are animals that are culled from breeding herds. There are opportunities to add weight and condition to these animals to increase their value. Unlike feeder calf prices, market cow prices tend to increase as animal weight increases. Death loss risk must be considered when planning to stocker market cows or

bulls. Seasonal market cow and bull price trends and forage and feed supplies also dictate the economic viability of this type of enterprise.

Stocker operations vary widely by the class of cattle utilized. They also vary significantly in animal health risk, optimal rate of weight rate, and additional management and resources needed to achieve production objectives. However, they all have the goal of adding weight to cattle and increasing overall cattle value in a cost-effective manner. For more information on stocker cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.