

It looks like a feedlot, but Heartland Cattle Company's heifer pens feature more square footage and bunk space per animal than ordinary feedlots, says manager Patsy Houghton.

Custom-Built Heifers

Heartland Cattle Company takes the extra management, feed resources and headaches out of developing replacement heifers.

by Troy Smith

A

t first glance, Heartland Cattle Company's facility looks like a feedlot. Set against the southwest Nebraska Sandhills, just south of the Republican River, its steel pens, fenceline feedbunks and cattle processing/hospital area have that familiar, modern feedlot look. Looks, however, don't reveal the real Heartland story.

Heartland doesn't feed out cattle. What they do specialize in is developing replacement heifers for customer's cow herds. They also purchase and develop breeding heifers to meet the specifications of contract clients. This company offers an effective and efficient service for a growing number of beef producers.

Located near McCook, Neb.,

Heartland Cattle Company is a partnership managed by Patsy Houghton, a former Extension beef specialist with Kansas State University. Houghton's partners include Cal Siegfried, marketing director for Decatur County Feed Yard, Oberlin, Kan., and Stuart and Roxane Seidner, McCook, Neb. farmers.

Through Houghton's and Siegfried's producer contacts, the need for a heifer development service was identified and formed.

From some of those same producer contacts came commitments to supply heifers. Construction of the Heartland facility began late last fall; by early 1991, pen space for more than 2,000 head was completed. It didn't take long to fill.

"We were pleased and a little

surprised at how quickly customer cattle came in," Houghton says. "We've received heifers from Montana to Mississippi and from both commercial and purebred producers."

Approximately 95 percent of Heartland's heifers are black. Commercial producers have strong interest in Angus replacement females.

A custom heifer development service, including an artificial insemination (A.I.) program, is attractive to producers because of what it costs to do it at home, says Houghton. The extra management and feed resources required to get heifers ready to breed, plus the time and labor required for an effective A.I. program, are influencing more cattlemen to consider a custom service. Kenneth Glaubius, owner of Blacktop

Angus, Beemer, Neb., is one producer who decided to send his heifers to Heartland.

Glaubius reasons are simple. He's short on pasture and has to rent more land to develop replacements at home, which gets expensive. Then, if he A.I.'s the heifers, he has to hire extra help. In addition, breeding season coincides with spring field work, so something is going to be neglected.

"I sent heifers to Patsy, expecting them to receive better care than they'd get at home," Glaubius says. "I'm guessing it may cost \$60 per head more to do it this way, but I think I'll get it back in higher conception rates. If we end up with 80 to 90 percent of those heifers bred to the A.I. sires we want, then the calves should be worth more."

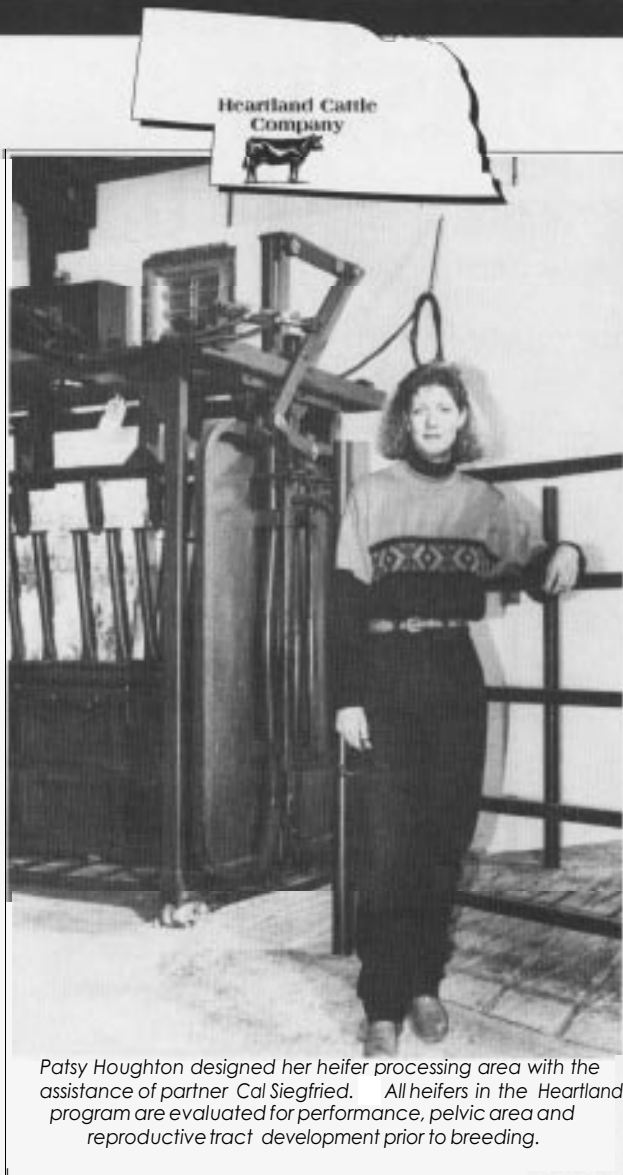
Custom-Built Pens and Ration

The Heartland facilities were built to help accomplish what Glaubius and other customers expect. Pens are designed to hold from 60 to 120 head, with more square footage per heifer than found in most feedlots. Space at the feedbunk is twice what feedlots normally allow for cattle.

"We never lose sight of the fact that these cattle are going back to a range situation," says Houghton. "For that reason, the heifers are limit-fed a high roughage ration of alfalfa, sorghum silage and corn. We're careful not to get them too fat. Fat heifers may cycle like crazy, but they don't stick when you try to breed them. Or, they may stop cycling altogether."

Prior to breeding, all heifers undergo a reproductive tract examination and pelvic area measurement. They are evaluated for structural and functional soundness as well as disposition. The heifers receive MGA and a little extra corn for a pre-breeding flush. But before any are bred, their owners are contacted to discuss A.I. sire selection.

"Under most circumstances we try to



Patsy Houghton designed her heifer processing area with the assistance of partner Cal Siegfried. All heifers in the Heartland program are evaluated for performance, pelvic area and reproductive tract development prior to breeding.

challenge the heifers with larger pelvic areas by using multi-trait sires," Houghton says. "They should be able to handle a little bigger calf. For the smaller heifers we stay with calving-ease sires."

A customer's heifers will normally undergo a 35-day breeding season. Then they will be pregnancy tested at 60 days of gestation. An ultra-sound scan is used to eliminate any doubt about pregnancy and to determine the fetus' sex. Most heifers will be sent home after the 60-day exam, but Heartland does offer a grass program for customers who want heifers summer grazed as well.

"We're trying to offer every service a customer may need and build a long-term relationship," Houghton says. "We stress intensive recordkeeping to our customers and we keep computerized

records for each heifer during her stay here."

Houghton also encourages customers to retain ownership of heifer progeny through the feedlot phase. With Heartland's close relationship with Decatur County Feed Yard, performance information can be collected and used to develop a complete program for genetic planning.

Heifers on Contract

Alluded to previously was the fact that some heifers are not customer owned but are what Houghton calls contract cattle. Heartland will buy groups of heifers and develop them for clients seeking packages of bred females. Contract heifers must come from reputable breeders who keep detailed records on birth date, weights and sire information.

Another important consideration is use of growth implants. No implanted heifers are purchased for contract clients and Houghton discourages other customers from keeping implanted heifers as replacements.

Plans call for expansion of the Heartland facility to a capacity of 6,000 head. One structure currently encloses the processing and office area. An additional A.I. building to accommodate three technicians is currently under construction. Another separate office also is planned to free up space for Houghton's research activities.

"We hope to work with some pharmaceutical and feed companies on projects dealing with synchronization and nutrition," Houghton says. "After we've followed enough progeny through the feedlot, we can do some things involving genetic mapping for both maternal and carcass traits. We've also been contacted by people interested in embryo transplant and cloning."

Houghton stresses that these projects have been put on the back burner for now. During the first year or



so, full attention will be paid to customer and contract heifers.

"There are numerous opportunities for research," she says, "but they will have to develop naturally over time."

On the Leading Edge

Rancher Mike Kelly of Sutherland, Neb. had heard of Houghton's work in nutrition and physiology, so was very interested when Siegfried told him about plans for Heartland Cattle Company. Although he was already involved with an intensive heifer development and AI. program on his own ranch, Kelly decided to send a group of heifers to Heartland.

"She (Houghton) is on the leading edge of technology," Kelly says. "We want to avail ourselves of any advantage she can offer, so we sent some heifers as sort of a test."

Kelly's goal is to selectively AI. heifers to raise calves that can keep up with calves from his mature cows. He says if Houghton can get an 80 to 85 percent conception rate on the heifers, and those heifers raise calves that compete, it will be well worth the cost.

The average cost for a seven month stay at Heartland is about \$280 per head. This includes feed, health costs, reproductive tract and pregnancy exams, as well as A.I. For heifers that are found open, charges are for feed, health and yardage only. Judging by the growing interest, the costs are competitive.

Room to Grow

Houghton believes the replacement heifer business has a lot of room for growth. Partners Stuart and Roxane Seidner produce ample feedstuffs for Heartland, but additional local supplies are readily available. The company can grow and expand service to meet demand.

"When construction is complete, we'll be able to handle heifers for fall breeding programs, too," Houghton says. "We'll be doing what we do best — trying to provide an efficient and effective service for our clients."

