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demand a higher-quality eating experience when they go out. We’ve pretty much got to demand it when we go buy cattle. The feedyard demands it because the packing plant demands it because the consumer demands it.”

Feeding and nurturing

Yazel grows calves on a “typical” grower ration: one-third each of corn, ground hay and wet distillers’ grains.

“We look to gain about 2.5 pounds (lb.) per day on the steers,” he says. “We don’t push them extremely hard, but hard enough to keep costs of gains reasonable.”

The calves on pasture graze wheat and triticale, and Yazel aims for similar gains there, making sure they’re never on a negative plane of nutrition.

Regardless of what the cattle are grown on, keeping stress to a minimum is a priority.

“From the time cattle are unloaded until they leave, we try to do everything as consistent as we can, from

buying feed to feeding time to getting the feed in the bunk,” he says. “Cattle are a lot like people. They like to eat at the same time every day at the same place in the bunk.”

The well-designed facilities are immaculately kept, always ready for processing the next load.

All of this helps in Yazel’s goal to keep health problems down — something he’s focused on more and more during a 30-year stocker career. Not long after graduating with an animal science degree from Oklahoma State University, he started backgrounding cattle. Cargill was one of his first customers. Since opening the grower yard in 1985, much has changed.

“It wasn’t anything for our health bills to be \$20,000 to \$25,000 a month because of all the processing and all the doctoring we did,” he remembers. “We straightened them out and sold them to farmers around here.”

In the last decade, fewer farmers are grazing their wheat pastures, and a much larger part of Yazel’s business is for large, corporate entities.

“There’s more demand for our services than ever before, and it’s primarily due to the healthy calves,” he says. “Big commercial feedyards have one cowboy to 8,000 to 10,000 head of cattle. They can’t handle high-risk cattle, like bawling calves.”

PHOTO BY GARY FIKS

Quality In, Quality Out

How one stocker fills demand for the best.

by *Miranda Reiman*

An anyone who says stocker operators don’t care about quality has never met Mark Yazel. The Kiowa, Kan., producer buys and sells more than 75,000 head of cattle per year, with a quarter of those spending time in his grower yard or grazing program. He doesn’t take in just any critter.

“We buy the top end of cattle in the country,” Yazel says. Procuring a variety of ages and sizes from all over the United States, he prefers English cattle. Specifications include at least 85% black-hided, with no more than one-eighth crossbreeding and “real limited exotic influence.”

But those are just the initial entry

requirements. After that they have to grow, stay healthy and grade after finishing later on. If they fall short, he’ll pass on them if they cross his path again.

“I can get all the information, not only from the feedlot, but from the plant, to see how many graded Choice, how many were fallouts, that type of thing,” Yazel says. A large majority of his cattle are purchased for Cargill, a company that has a keen interest in getting the good ones, he adds.

“We work on narrow margins,” the cattleman says, in a segmented yet interconnected market. “We’ve got to be more consistent in what we produce. People

So Yazel and his crew precondition them for an average of 60 days before sending calves to feedyards.

“There are still a lot of arguments about whether to use modified-live or killed vaccines, but I’m a modified-live guy,” he says, adding that position is based on results.

Implant programs are coordinated with the feedlot customers, so many times heifers don’t get one and higher-quality steers get a low-potency dose.

“You’ve got to have performance, but it’s hard to get performance without the right genetics in place,” he says.

Providing stewardship

In addition to his order-buying and backgrounding businesses, Yazel develops heifers and bulls and has a trucking enterprise.

The overriding theme in all his work is to do it well.

“We try to be stewards of the land and the cattle,” Yazel says. “When it’s all said and done and I meet my Maker, I want to have been a good steward, to have done what I was supposed to here on this earth.”



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