

Feeder-calf Basics

How can cow-calf producers ensure their calf crop performs in the feedlot?
This Wyoming feeder shares suggested strategies for a successful experience.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

Sending weaned calves to the feedlot, whether for backgrounding or developing breeding stock, can be a stressful experience — for both calves and producers. That annual calf crop is a producer's paycheck and investment in the future. As a producer and custom feeder, Marty Shepard understands both sides of the equation. Here he shares his experiences to help ensure a successful feedlot outcome.

30-plus-year history

Shepard founded 4S Cattle Co. in

Wheatland, Wyo., in 1978. Through various expansions through the years, the facility has grown to accommodate 8,500 head, with a primary focus on heifer development. A typical year will include developing about 6,000 heifers and 500 bulls, with the balance being feeder calves. 4S Cattle Co. has USDA's Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification and follows protocols for "all-natural" programs.

The family operation includes his older sister, Debbie Shepard, who manages the

Honing in on heifer development

Mention developing replacement heifers in the feedlot, and Marty Shepard acknowledges that many producers often panic at the thought because of the misconception that heifers get too fat for successful breeding rates in that scenario.

Shepard underscores that quality replacement heifers can be developed to an appropriate breeding weight in feedlot settings when a plan and open communication are put in place between the cattle owner and the feeder.

"Getting heifers too fat can happen if you're not careful," he acknowledges. "I have cows of my own, so I know. Our end goal for customers is always to develop heifers to get as many bred as possible."

At his Wheatland, Wyo.-based feedlot, 4S Cattle Co., Shepard will develop an average of 6,000 replacement heifers annually. He offers these tips for developing heifers in confinement.

► **Communicate with the feeder** what the target breeding weight goal is, and when you want to breed the heifers. Then a ration can be developed accordingly. Shepard says 750 to 800 pounds (lb.) is a realistic target that represents about 60%-70% of the mature weight of a 1,300-lb. cow.

"If ranchers would weigh their cows, they'd find most are bigger than 1,100 pounds," he notes. "The average cow is probably more like 1,300 to 1,500 pounds."

Shepard says he usually focuses on breeding condition scores (BCS) more than weight. He notes that a BCS of 5 or 6 is a good target.

"If they have too much fat or condition, they won't breed," he adds.

► **What does feedlot development cost?** Shepard says the first question he's often asked by producers is the cost of gain to develop replacement heifers. His answer: "I don't do cost of gain with replacement heifers. We are talking higher-roughage rations, which are more expensive. The average cost to develop heifers at 4S is \$1.40-\$1.50 per day. That's feed and yardage. The cost to treat sick cattle is over and above that."

He adds, "Heifers that come to us average 435 pounds out of 6,000 head, so we have to put a lot of weight on them in 200 days."

► **Administer prebreeding shots.** "I'm a believer in those," says Shepard. He adds, "Prebreeding shots and following AI (artificial insemination) protocols is of the utmost importance."



bookkeeping and billing, as well as loads and feeds as needed.

In addition to the livestock enterprise, Shepard also farms about 1,000 acres of corn and alfalfa, and includes soybean and beets as part of his crop rotation. Winter wheat

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AI protocols

What's his preferred protocol?

"I like the MGA protocol the best," he says. He reasons that it's an inexpensive protocol that can be followed fairly easily — feeding 0.5 mg every day for 14 days, then a prostaglandin shot given 19 days after that. (He notes it used to be 17 days, but now is 19.)

"We see 90% of heifers come in heat in 72 hours after the shot," says Shepard, reporting a 66%-70% settle rate. The total cost for feeding MGA and administering the prostaglandin shot at his feedlot is \$5.69.

MGA pellets can't be fed as a topdress because aggressive eaters will get it, and passive heifers won't, he emphasizes. "It needs to be premeasured and premixed in a feed truck and fed with bunk space for all."

If customers request it, Shepard will use CIDR® inserts, but he notes they are more expensive and more labor intensive — requiring cattle to move through the chute three times. He estimates the cost for using CIDRs at about \$17-\$20 — about a \$14 difference over MGA.

He acknowledges, "One advantage of using CIDRs is time. It's a full 33 days for the MGA protocol, with the CIDR [protocol] you can have heifers bred in 10 days. Producers need to decide what works best for them based on cost and time."

He concludes, "No matter what protocol you use, you have to be thorough."

Interestingly, Shepard has all heat detection in his feedlot done on foot. He will use heat patches if customers request it. Heifers in standing heat are sorted into groups every four hours — from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m.; 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. and 5 p.m. to dark — and bred accordingly.

Shepard allows customers to come to the feedlot and breed their own heifers or help with processing if they prefer.



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is seeded to provide fall grazing, as well as erosion control. All farm ground is irrigated, to supplement the annual precipitation of just 12 inches (in.) per year.

Shepard's focus is on accommodating the needs of his feedlot customers.

"We will take two bulls to develop, or 600 head," he says. "We don't turn anyone away, and we strive to go above and beyond what we need to do."

He adds, "When a customer brings us their cattle, I do what they request." To that end, Shepard emphasizes communication. He sits down with customers to formulate a plan for their cattle, which typically includes establishing the desired days on feed, average daily gain, and weight the customer wants to target for the cattle — whether for a terminal market or breeding stock.

Shepard also maintains an open-door policy. He explains that customers are always welcome to stop in without calling ahead, and if a customer decides they want to sell their cattle on the spur of the moment based on what the market is doing, they have the option to do so.

Shepard adds, "In ag, it's important to have a general plan, but I realize plans always get altered."

Prior preparation

With regard to readying calves for the feedlot, Shepard is an advocate of preconditioning. He says, "In a perfect world, I'd love to receive calves that are weaned, preconditioned and have the bawl out of them."

Shepard explains that preconditioned calves perform the best. He emphasizes that preconditioning needs to truly mean "pre-

— as in giving vaccination shots to calves and then putting them back on the cow for 30 days prior to weaning.

By following this protocol, Shepard says that when preconditioned calves arrive at his feedlot, he has less than 10% that need to be pulled and treated for illness. He gives the example of 200 head that are properly preconditioned. His crew may pull four head, compared to 20 or 40 head when the group is not preconditioned.

"If calves are walking on the truck to go to the feedlot and that's when you are giving them a five-way or seven-way vaccine, you may as well shoot it on the ground," Shepard adds. The calves are experiencing so much stress at that time that the vaccine won't work as intended.

Additionally, Shepard notes that the immune system requires about 21 days to kick in; thus, administering vaccine when the calves will go back on cows and be under less stress allows for that immunity boost to develop.

"It's important to avoid peaks and valleys. Gradual is better, so that's why I advise preconditioning," Shepard says.

With that said, Shepard realizes it is not a perfect world, and not all calves will be preconditioned. When calves arrive that have not been preconditioned, he says, "I like to allow 10 days to two weeks to get them on feed and lower their stress levels."

To facilitate that process, he offers calves good feed and clean water immediately when they are unloaded — and he and his help keep a pitchfork handy.

He explains, "We will pitchfork feed out of the bunk and onto the ground to newly received calves for three days. We do this because their instinct is to eat off of the

ground, not out of a bunk. It's important to get them eating. My dad always said, 'If they're not eating and they're not drinking, they're gonna get sick.' I'm old school; I learned a lot from my father."

Another rule Shepard follows is feeding calves at the same time every day.

"Cattle are schedule-oriented," he explains. "We feed at 7 a.m. every day, including holidays. We feed 6,000 head in three hours and have two trucks. I believe feeding in a timely manner is important in every operation."

Attention to details

Shepard says he also believes in good rations to fit the needs of each specific group of cattle.

"All cattle are different, whether you are feeding English breeds compared to Continental, or feeding for terminal program versus breeding development," he explains. "We build rations around the cattle and test the feed in the bunk every two weeks."

Shepard works with two consulting nutritionists on ration development, and he is very hands-on with management, saying, "I'm often in one of our feed trucks so I can monitor the cattle."

He and his crew also frequently weigh groups of cattle to measure how cattle are gaining and where they are in reaching the target weight goal the customer has established.

Throughout the feeding process, Shepard comes back to emphasizing communication.

"The more information we can gather and share, the better we will be in producing an end product that the cattle owner and the industry wants," he says.



Editor's Note: *Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.*