

A Heifer Pro

Innovative marketer finds role in sourcing and developing bred replacement heifers, providing online resource.

by Troy Smith, field editor



► **Left:** West sources heifer calves weighing 500-600 pounds from reputable Wyoming herds. Qualifying candidates are grown in custom feed-yards then synchronized for one round of AI to calving-ease sires. Within 24 hours of insemination, heifers are hauled to West Ranch, where they graze meadows and surrounding hill pastures for about five months.

for their breeding herds. The latter group represents a niche market that West serves by procuring replacement-quality heifer calves and developing them for sale as bred females.

“Particularly for smaller operations, developing heifers can be a real challenge. Even some bigger ranches find that purchasing replacements helps simplify management, and it’s often more cost-effective, but we cater mostly to smaller operations,” says West, who manages the bred-heifer business from his family’s ranch near Chugwater, Wyo. “We’re happy to sell in load lots, but we’ll sell just one or two heifers if that’s what a buyer needs.”

Though originally from Colorado, West’s father and uncles relocated to southeastern Wyoming some 30 years ago. Specialization in bred heifers grew out of a previous stocker enterprise. It’s helping diversify the ranch, and it suits West’s interests in marketing and technology. He is a representative for Superior Livestock Auction Inc., and he’s computer-savvy. Many heifer customers have come to West through the website he created.

Online resource

Dubbed *Heifer.Pro*, the website is more than a marketing vehicle for West’s own business. It is the hub of a network through which West tries to help commercial cow-calf producers find sensible solutions to their replacement heifer needs.

Along with replacement-heifer market data, the site features information West has gleaned from a variety of university specialists

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Plenty of people worry that the U.S. beef cow herd is too small. Liquidation has continued for two to three years in key cattle-producing states, despite economic signals that typically trigger expansion of the nation’s herd. The problem is the weather. In much of cow country, persistent drought has preempted herd rebuilding and fostered a very limited total cattle inventory.

There has been plenty of talk about the lack of heifer retention. Professors, prophets and pundits claim the beginning of heifer retention hinges on a change in precipitation patterns. They are, of course, referring to retention at levels that could achieve an extended period of industry growth. It doesn’t mean that no heifers are saved. Even during the drought, a good many producers have added young females to their breeding herds.

Another consequence of drought is the reduced supply and higher cost of forages. If there is an upside to bigger feed bills, it might be that affected producers are prompted to more carefully consider their production costs. They might look more closely at what it costs to keep a cow, and the cost of putting a replacement female in the herd. That’s something cattleman Kit West was encouraging producers to do even before the drought-driven jump in feed prices.

West believes producers are not equally equipped to raise and develop replacement heifers. Because of their resource base, management and availability of labor, some producers have an advantage. For others, sending home-raised heifer calves to a custom heifer-development service may be a better alternative. Still others find it more economical to purchase replacements

PHOTOS COURTESY KIT & KRISTA WEST

I N N O V A T I O N S



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and other industry experts. Links lead to articles addressing various aspects of heifer development. Topics include heifer- and sire-selection criteria, nutrition, and application of synchronized artificial insemination (AI) and other reproductive technologies.

West says he hopes the site will help ranchers make informed decisions. If one decision is to buy replacement heifers, information on West’s offering is available. So are links to other heifer sources, including the Wyoming Premium Heifer Program and Missouri’s Show-Me-Select Heifer Program. Additionally, individual ranchers with heifers for sale are invited to list their offerings on the site — at no charge.

“I’ve promoted the website through agricultural newspapers, so ranchers with heifers listed on the site get free advertising,” West explains. “Allowing others to list their heifers is a way of helping the industry while marketing our own heifers.”

Developing the heifers

For his replacement-heifer enterprise, West sources heifer calves weighing 500-600 pounds from reputable Wyoming herds. He has found that heifers raised at a high elevation and under challenging conditions can thrive in a variety of production environments. While home-state customers were his original targets, many heifers sell into other states, including Nebraska, Kansas and Iowa.

“I look for heifers that will reach a moderate mature size of 1,150 to 1,250 pounds. I want to see their mothers before I buy. I want quality heifers because that’s what buyers expect,” stresses West.

All purchased heifers undergo reproductive tract evaluation and pelvic measurement. They are tested for persistent infection with bovine viral diarrhea (PI-BVD) and scrutinized for disposition. About 20% won’t meet criteria for “keepers” and will become feeder heifers.

Qualifying candidates are grown in custom feedyards located in Wyoming and Colorado, where the development ration consists of silage and distillers’ grains. The heifers are synchronized for one round of AI to calving-ease sires. Within 24 hours of insemination, heifers are hauled to West Ranch, where they graze meadows and surrounding hill pastures for about five months. Thirty days after insemination, clean-up bulls are turned out with the heifers.

“By waiting a month to put out bulls, there are no mix-ups as to which heifers settled to AI and which are bull-bred. Generally, 60% to 65% of the heifers will become pregnant after AI and will calve during a February-March time frame. Bull-bred heifers will calve in April and May,” explains West. “We pregnancy-test in September. Usually, heifers are delivered to their new owners in October and November.”

For marketing the bred heifers at private treaty, West’s Web presence has been a useful tool. *Heifer.Pro* typically attracts between 20 and 30 hits per day. He hopes more ranchers will take advantage of it in the future. West admits that certain aspects of his Web network are underdeveloped. The project remains a work in progress. Still, he is pleased with the progress made in developing the *Heifer.Pro* market report for sharing bred-heifer prices collected from 20 or more auction markets located across several states.

“I’m in the process of expanding that report so we can have a comprehensive report on bred-heifer prices. That kind of information benefits both buyers and sellers,” says West.

West says he hopes *Heifer.Pro* can serve as a springboard for development of a social network for cattle producers. He sees value for matching buyers and sellers of heifers, and in the beneficial sharing of experience, ideas and information among cattlemen who participate.

“A lot of producers do not enjoy marketing. It’s time-consuming, and they’d rather spend the time doing something they

enjoy, but I really like marketing. I enjoy learning about it and helping others develop marketing plans for their own situations,” says West. “But, whether it’s marketing or some other aspect of ranch management that challenges us, increased sharing of ideas should lead to more workable solutions.”



Editor’s Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.