

Wyoming Premium Heifer Program



Heifer-development and marketing program tailored to needs of Western ranches.

by **Troy Smith**, field editor

It's not like Scott Lake, John Henn and their Wyoming cohorts invented the wheel. Other programs for marketing process-certified, replacement-quality females already exist. Some have operated for several years. Missouri's Show-Me-Select program comes to mind, but Illinois, Mississippi and West Virginia boast similar heifer development and marketing enterprises. Kentucky has three regional programs. There were none in the West, however, until the Wyoming Premium Heifer Program (WPHP) was launched in 2012.

Diminished U.S. cow numbers and corresponding low supplies of calves and feeder cattle likely mean cattle feeders will be aggressively competing for heifers at the same time cow-calf producers are trying to rebuild or expand their breeding herds. Drought has stymied expansion for many producers, but that will change after rain returns. In some locations, things may be turning around.

According to Scott Lake, University of Wyoming, adding value to replacement heifers and bred heifers through a structured

management and marketing program can provide potential buyers a source of females representing known production practices and genetics. Those females ought to be worth more money, and the timing seems right for cow-calf producers to take advantage of potential premiums.

"A lot of Wyoming producers have looked for ways to diversify by adding another enterprise to their operations. There are good cattle in this state, some really good cattle, and there is opportunity to profit from a replacement-female enterprise that adds value to heifers," says Lake.

However, many Wyoming heifers are marketed just like steers, as calves and feeder cattle. Even replacement-quality heifers may return less money, per pound, than steers. Lake figured producers

might change that if heifers were developed according to a program protocol and marketed accordingly. He believed producers already developing and offering bred heifers for sale could benefit from a coordinated marketing effort.

Getting started

"We saw how the concept was working in other states, most notably in Missouri, but success requires emphasis on marketing," adds Lake.



A joint effort of the University of Wyoming and the Wyoming Business Council, the WPHP is patterned after the Missouri model, but tailored to fit Wyoming. Actually, the objective is to establish this program as a recognized source of quality commercial

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► **Above:** Many Wyoming heifers are marketed just like steers, as calves and feeder cattle.

replacement-heifer calves and bred heifers managed under standardized criteria that meet the requirements of buyers located just about anywhere in the nation. The major difference is that heifers are marketed western style.

“In Wyoming, many cattle operations are fairly large and extensive. There aren’t as many local auction markets here, so a lot of these operations sell cattle off the ranch in load lots through video auctions and utilizing the Internet,” explains John Henn, of the Wyoming Business Council’s agribusiness division.

Consequently, Henn sought the participation of two of the region’s larger sale barns in handling the sale of WPHP heifers. Special sales were scheduled at Torrington Livestock Market in southeastern Wyoming and at Buffalo Livestock Auction in the north-central part of the state. Both firms offered Internet video-sale capability. WPHP consignors had the option of selling via video or delivering their heifers to their preferred sale site and sending them through the auction ring. Henn says the intent was to provide an opportunity for producers of all sizes to capture market premiums.

“We put a lot of effort into making producers aware of the program and its advantages,” tells Henn. “I’d hoped to get 3,000 females enrolled the first year.”

Wyoming producers seeking to enroll replacement heifer calves or bred heifers had to meet or exceed certain criteria. Documentation would be required for various management practices performed. As an incentive, the \$25 ranch enrollment fee was waived for the first year. A \$3 fee was collected for each female enrolled, which also covered the official WPHP visual ear tag.

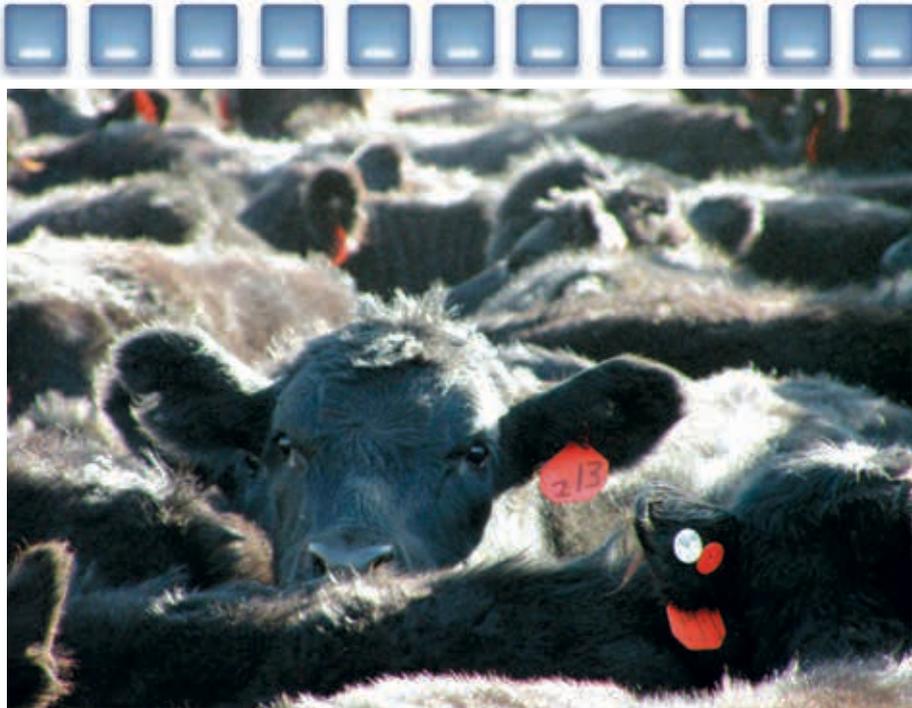
Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) certification was mandatory for all participating producers. All heifers had to meet minimum disease

immunization requirements, including brucellosis vaccination with appropriate tags. Heifers that had received growth-promoting implants were ineligible. Heifer calves must have been weaned for at least 45 days prior to sale, and pregnancy examination was mandatory for all bred heifers. Compliance with these requirements qualified heifers for the program’s “Brown 1” level.

Heifers qualified for “Gold 2” level if they were tested for persistent infection with bovine viral diarrhea (PI-BVD). Bred heifers qualifying for “Gold 2” also must have been

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bred by artificial insemination (AI) to known sires with expected progeny differences (EPDs) ranking in the top 25% of their respective breed for calving ease direct. A 15-day post-AI delay was required before heifers were exposed to cleanup bulls, with the total breeding season not exceeding 45 days.

According to Henn, the program attracted producer attention. Although interested, some ranchers took a wait-and-see attitude. Others were ready. Most of those producers were applying the prescribed management practices already. It looked like the 3,000-head goal would be realized.

Promotion of WPHP through various advertising media, cattlemen’s meetings and industry trade shows met with promising response from potential buyers, too.

By early fall, though, drought had forced the withdrawal of some hard-hit heifer consignors.

“Because of the shortage of forage and feed, a lot of cattle had to move. Some producers needed to sell their heifers earlier than planned. We lost over 1,400 head from the program,” relates Henn. “Still, we sold over 1,500 head.”

Female premiums

Henn says heifers sold to buyers from South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa and

Oklahoma, as well as Wyoming. Bidders found WPHP bred heifers particularly attractive. When compared to the average price of other Wyoming-sourced bred heifers selling during the two-week period around the November WPHP sale at Torrington, WPHP bred heifers fetched an average premium of \$22 per head. At the January sale in Buffalo, prices reflected an average premium of \$81, compared to other bred heifers selling at that time.

“For the first year, that’s not bad. As we build the program and gain more recognition, I think it will get better,” says Henn. “Based on the feedback I received from consignors, I think they are benefiting from the program.”

Consignor Joe Glode sees the benefit. The Saratoga rancher had already started keeping, developing and breeding more of his home-raised commercial Angus heifers in an effort to close the price gap. He was certain of their quality, but had been taking a discount at sale time.

“We struggled with marketing. That’s the primary reason we were drawn to the [WPBP] program. We benefited from the way it was promoted,” says Glode. “Qualifying didn’t require anything that we weren’t doing already. Documenting it was easy enough.”

Managing stocker cattle at high elevation, near Lander, WPHP consignor Archie Chant purchases heifers from Wyoming ranches known for quality genetics. For about 10 years, he’s been topping those large strings

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of heifers for groups to develop and sell as replacements.

“We’re trying to offer range-fit heifers acclimated to elevation, using good management practices that add value. I think buyers want some assurance of that, and program certification gives them confidence,” says Chant. “The program fits us. I wish it had been available when we first started selling bred heifers. I know it introduced our product to more potential buyers.”

Pleased, and ready to enroll more heifers in WPHP, Chant does have some ideas about how promotion of the program and

advertising might be improved. Glode says he wouldn’t be afraid of tightening the criteria for heifer qualification.

Lake says the inaugural year’s enrollment might have been higher if criteria were less stringent, but relaxed rules are less likely to yield added value, buyer confidence and those sought-after premiums. There’s almost always room for improvement though, so input from consignors, as well as buyer feedback, will help determine how the program proceeds.

“It’s difficult to develop a program that everyone can meet or agrees with,” says Lake.

“However, we are continually trying to look at every guideline within the program, to make sure it fits with the best production practices for Wyoming producers.”

WPHP guidelines for 2013 are posted at wyobeef.com. For more information contact Scott Lake, livestock extension specialist, University of Wyoming Department of Animal Science, at 307-766-3892 or scotlake@uwyo.edu; or John Henn, livestock and meat marketing program manager, Wyoming Business Council Agribusiness Division at 307-777-2847 or john.henn@wyo.gov.



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