

DATA & DOLLARS

Alabama Pasture to Rail program helps producers capture the full value of their animals and get valuable data.

by Becky Mills, field editor

When Alex Tigie toured a group of Kansas feedlots in May 2016, the meat science doctoral student naturally saw ribeyes and dressing percentages on the hoof. However, in his day job as Auburn regional extension agent for animal sciences and forages, he also saw the potential for smaller producers to capture those dollars they've been leaving for others in the industry.

One of those producers is his dad, Eddie.

"Before I came to Auburn, Dad sold at the stockyard like everybody else," Tigie says. "Then he started preconditioning, but we felt like he was still leaving a lot of profit potential on the table."

That thought sparked the idea of resurrecting the Alabama Pasture to Rail program, which was active from the 1980s until 2010. The idea is for producers, especially those who don't have enough calves to send a truckload on their own, to put them with calves from other producers and send them all to the feedyard.

There, feedlot personnel carefully record feedlot performance and get carcass data at harvest, which

they send back to the producers. However, when Tigie approached his then-boss, Lisa Kriese-Anderson (now retired), "She told me I was crazy. She said it was more than I could handle."

Thankfully, Kriese-Anderson knew she was dealing with a stubborn dynamo who could handle what amounts to another full-time job, and she changed her mind. The first load of the reborn Pasture to Rail calves shipped in October 2016. Two more loads followed, a total of 208 head from 16 different producers shipped that first year. In 2019, 11 loads with 705 calves made the trip to Hy-Plains Feedyard in Montezuma, Kan. By mid-October of this year, nine loads will have shipped, and Tigie expects the total to hit 1,000 to 1,200 by year's end.

Vista Farms managers, Scott and Sarah Die-McElfresh, hopped on the train, or at least their calves did, that first year.

Scott says, "The first thing we said was, 'Wow! We can get data back! And we can get paid for what we produce.'"

To date, the Fayette, Ala., purebred Angus

operation has sent 457 calves. While some of the cattle are from commercial recipient dams, the majority are from the purebred side, including embryo transfer (ET) calves and those sired by big name artificial insemination (AI) bulls.

“The data we report to the American Angus Association is hard numbers, actual measurements,” Scott says. “Putting those back in helps calibrate the genomics.”

Sarah adds, “We’re improving the accuracy of that data, and we’re using it in our decision-making. We want head-turners. We try to hit a beautiful medium of EPDs (expected progeny differences) and phenotype. If they don’t have the phenotype to go with the numbers, we put them with the Pasture to Rail calves.”

Knowing these high-end Angus genetics will bring the top dollar helps ease the sting of culling animals the pair does not think will make the grade as seedstock.

“We get paid for our hard work,” Scott explains. “If we take them to the sale barn, we get paid for a warm body.”

While the husband and wife team may not think the calves that go to the feedyard are head-turners, the feedlot managers at Hy-Plains disagree.

Scott says, “We’ve been told the feedlot managers come look when they hear a load of Vista cattle are coming off the truck.”

With the quality the cattle are putting on the rail, Vista is also definitely getting paid for more than warm bodies. Based on the estimated value of the cattle when they get on the truck, the Vista calves are returning \$95.30 per head. Their paychecks are based on a four-year average of 3.86 pound (lb.) average daily gain (ADG) on both steers and heifers, a hot carcass weight of 878 lb., 14.74-square-inch (in.) ribeye area, 81.4% Choice, 7.74% Prime and 39.16% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB).

Looking purely at the gross minus expenses, Scott says they’re netting \$1,200 a head. They’re also picking up new bull customers. Doug and Rance Wigginton, a father and son team from Somerville, Ala., started with 15 calves in 2016 and now send around 90 head a year.

Continued on page 32



“We didn’t know about Vista before the program,” Doug says. “They’ve been outstanding.”

Tigue goes over the feedlot and performance data with the Wiggintons, then helps them select Vista bulls that will complement their 100-cow commercial Angus herd.

Tigue says, “The Wiggintons are close in behind Vista.”

Their cattle are averaging a 3.14 ADG, 839 lb. carcass weight, 14.15-square-in. ribeye area, 77.3% Choice, 2.4% Prime and 28% CAB. The bottom line is looking good, too. Based on the quality-based grid the calves are sold on, Rance says Angus cattle pay more at the Pasture to Rail.

Doug agrees, “We’re making \$5 a head more on quality.”

The Wiggintons had tried a number of marketing options before going with the Pasture to Rail program, but even with preconditioning and putting their feeder calves in a video sale, they had to haul

them to a gathering point to commingle with other calves, then haul the ones that didn’t fit on the load home. Often the only option for those calves was the sale barn.

“Year before, we made \$150 more a head than we would if we had carried them to the sale barn,” Rance says. “It doesn’t make sense to let somebody else have it.”

Tigue spends sleepless nights trying to do all he can to make sure the producers come out on the right side.

“Our Number-1 goal is to get data. Goal 1B is to protect the value of those animals,” he says. “We forward contract and hedge all we can. Typically, 85% of the cattle are under some kind of price protection.”

Tigue, who says he’s conservative with price protection, will often hedge or forward contract when the cattle show a \$5 to \$8 a hundredweight (cwt.) profit.



"OUR #1 GOAL IS TO GET THE DATA!"

— Alex Tigie

He adds, "Risk management was made for the situation we were in this spring with COVID. This coming year will be different because the market is still rebounding."

Even with price protection, Tigie says some producers have come out in the red. "Some guys have had a bad experience and decided retained ownership was more risk than they wanted to deal with. They all learn how incredibly important health is. That's the big takeaway."

He says his dad was one of the ones whose calves had health problems.

"Early on in the program, my dad's cattle were the sacrificial lambs," Tigie says. "When we needed cattle to fill a load, we sent them even though they were small and hadn't had enough time on feed. The second year it really bit him."

Tigie says they began to focus more on nutrition and purchased a set of scales to record more data. "Our goal is to not let one leave weighing less than 800 lb," he says. "Healthy cattle make money almost every time, regardless of the market situation or their genetic makeup."

The No. 1 goal of collecting and using data has also been met.

With his 30-cow Angus-based herd, Eddie Tigie says, "This year, we're using data from the Pasture to Rail to pick our AI bull. There was one sire that blew the others away. We haven't gotten to the point of culling cows on data yet, but that's our goal."

"We've found out our cattle can do their job," says Sarah Die-McElfresh. "They can perform."

Not just the Vista cattle, but the Alabama calves as a whole perform.

"I've looked back at the data from Pasture to Rail 20 years ago, and it is really neat to see the



differences," says Tigie. "If they hit 50% Choice, they were really excited. Now, with a mix of consignors, we have 80 to 85% Choice, 10 to 30% CAB, and 5 to 8% Prime. These are actual tangible measurements and real progress. That's as exciting as it gets."

And as for Goal 1B, the original vision Tigie had in May of 2016? Over four years, 73 different farms averaged \$85.39 a head profit on 2,046 head.

"That's money that stays here," Doug says. 