

Rock Solid Performance

In the heart of Kansas' Post Rock Country, Joe Thielen and his family use Angus to improve maternal and carcass traits in their commercial cow-calf operation.

BY ANGIE STUMP

Committed to quality — you can find this etched in stone at Thielen Beef, located near Dorrance, in the Shell Rock Hills between the Saline and Smoky Hill Rivers of north central Kansas. Joe and Susan Thielen and their three sons manage and own Thielen Beef, a three-generation diversified crop and cattle operation.

Winners of the Beef Improvement Federation's (BIF) 1995 Outstanding Commercial Producer award, Thielens run more than 500 commercial cows. They use a structured three-breed rotational system to improve uniformity and performance within their herd.

"We are a family operation. Together we make it work," Joe says.

His wife, Susan, is a fourth grade teacher. They have three sons, Joey, a Kansas State University graduate who is currently attending graduate school at the University of Wyoming; Matthew, a sophomore at Kansas State; and Kevin, a sophomore at Wilson High School.

Joey, Matt and Kevin assist with the artificial insemination (AI) program. All three boys help during the summer and whenever home during the school year.

Joe's dedication and love of the cattle industry is shared with his sons. Joe was a state 4H beef project finalist, and Matt won the state and national 4H beef project award.



ANGIE STUMP PHOTOS

Building the Foundation

Joe's grandfather, John Pete, purchased the farm in 1904. Joe started farming with his father, George, in '71 after graduating from Fort Hays University and moved to the ranch in '78.

Breeding for replacement females is the goal of their ranch. "Replacements are really important to our operation," Joe says. "They represent our future. We eventually will have all of our cows out of AI sires."

Thielens use Angus, Simmental and Hereford in their structured, three-breed rotation. Although Joe says he does not like to try new breeds, he did introduce Red Angus last year.

As a steward of the land, Joe tries to manage the grasses and what the good Lord gives him each year in crop production. "What we try to do is produce an efficient grazing factory, or cow, that can harvest the grass," he says. "The grass is our renewable resource so we want to take good care of it. Cattle take what would be a waste and turn it into a nutrient dense and tasty product."

Utilizing residues is an important strategy for the Thielen Family. Crop production includes winter wheat, grain sorghum and forages for silage and baling.

In the early '70s Joe entered cattle in a steer futurity. From this experience, it was evident that change was needed. "I realized the cattle I was raising were not as productive as they should be," he says.

Wanting to create an above-average product, Joe introduced Simmental into his Hereford-based herd. Worried about too high of a percentage of exotic influence and their adaptability to his environment, he began using Angus bulls on the Simmental females. He sought maternal Angus bulls from superior herds with the help of estimated breeding values (EBVs).

"We selected Angus because of their moderate size, mothering ability and

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carcass merit," he says.

Today they breed their Simmental sired cows to Angus bulls, Angus sired cows to Hereford bulls, and Hereford sired cows to Simmental bulls.

The Cornerstone — Performance Data

"I think it is important to keep track of each individual on the ranch," Joe says. "You would like to think you know what each cow is producing, but you don't. You've got to put it down in black and white."

Thielens are committed to collecting data on all of their cattle. Last year 46 calves in one pasture lost their ear tags. Dedicated to knowing which cow produced which calf and collecting that data and maintaining the identity of each calf, they took the time to sort and pair each cow and calf.

Each year individual weaning data is collected on all of the calves and entered into the family computer. The computer has become one of the most important tools on the Thielen ranch.

"We would be lost without it," Joe says. Entering data into the computer is a community job, the whole family assists. They record calving dates, AI dates, calving scores, body condition scores, herd health practices, pregnancy checking data, weaning weights, noticed heats, bad eyes and other problems.

In 1991 they developed a rating system for their cow herd. Each year cows earn a rating between 1 and 4, based on production. The ratings are calculated by taking each age group and breaking the offspring down by sex and then figure an average weaning weight for the group. Average weaning weight to 110 percent earns a 2 rating; 111 percent and greater receives a 1; 90 to 99 percent of average is a 3; and below 90 percent is a 4.

The rating system is used in culling cows, testing new bulls, finding replacement heifers, deciding which cows get AI, sire determination and grouping of cows for management purposes.

They also track every sire and sire daughters by giving the sire a rating score. "We have culled some high priced bulls that did not make the average," says this dedicated producer.

They also use performance records and expected progeny differences (EPDs) to select sires for their bull battery. "Our whole program revolves around EPDs of high accuracy, proven sires," Joe explains. Before the use of EPDs they selected sires using EBVs.

Thielens do not record birth weights. However, they do record a calving-ease



Committed to excellence. Commercial cow-calf producer, Joe Thielen, is dedicated to producing efficient cattle.

score for each first-calf heifer. "I am a believer in calving ease EPDs," Joe says. "I feel with the use of AI and EPDs we have made tremendous improvements in our herd."

Evaluation of their performance data indicated a need to improve pregnancy rates of the second calf heifers. By adjusting the nutritional program for these females, they achieved an increase in pregnancy rates from 60 percent in 1978 to 96 percent in 1995.

Established AI Program

Thielens started using AI 12 years ago. "We believe it is cost effective," Joe says. Their program includes AI breeding all of the replacement heifers and more than 200 cows.

The use of AI has increased the performance and quality of their herd. "It is the best investment we've made in agriculture," he says. "Our ultimate goal is to have all of our females from proven AI sires that will fit our resources and environment."

Their cost-effective program includes synchronizing replacement heifers by feeding MGA for 14 days in mid-April.

Seventeen days after the last feeding of MGA they are given a shot of prostaglandin. A second injection is given to unresponsive females. In 1995, they had a 92 percent response rate to synchronization and bred 75 heifers in one day.

These progressive producers use their rating system for selecting cows to AI. They AI cows with a 1 or 2 rating with at least a 50 day postpartum date at the beginning of the breeding period. Cow synchronization is to breed everything for a week, on the seventh day give a shot of prostaglandin to the remaining cows and breed by heat for about two weeks. In 1995, 75 percent of the selected cows were bred AI.

"One of my most enjoyable times is to get out on the horse and heat check the AI cows," he says. "It gives me an opportunity to relax, slow down and enjoy God's creations."

Stepping Stones — Sire Selection

For years Thielens purchased their herd bulls at bull tests and from successful purebred breeders. They have started using some of their own crossbred

bulls, with the requirement they have three generations of AI behind them.

"When I started out I thought I had to find the very best bull and use him heavily and that is how I'd get the best cow herd," he says. "But I've done an about face and believe you need to have the best bull battery. If you just use one heavily you don't know what problems might show up such as longevity, fertility, dispositions, carcass merit and so forth later on."

Adding On — Replacement Heifers

Thielens raise all of their own replacements. They select for individual performance, disposition, frame, physical soundness, sire lines, cow families, and milk and udder quality of the dam. Their goal is for their mature females not to weigh more than 1,200 pounds.

The replacements are selected after weaning and then are freeze branded with permanent herd identification and sent to Oklahoma to graze winter wheat. They return to the ranch in March and begin estrus synchronization in May. They try to calve their heifers between 22 and 24 months of age.

A Solid Core— Flexible and Efficient Management

Uniformity is one of the goals of Thielen Beef. With their crossbreeding program they have tried to eliminate the extremes within their herd.

Cows are managed by age. The herd is divided into groups of first-calf heifers, second calf, third calf, fourth calf, and then the rest are mature cows. Each group is fed differently.

When pregnancy checking, each cow is given a body condition score. These scores are recorded on the computer.

Thielens try to be in harmony with Mother Nature. They are calving later and use the spring grass to flush the cows. Calving season begins for first-calf heifers at the end of February and the cows start the middle of March.

Another management technique used by Joe is feeding his first-calf heifers at night. He believes this helps to get more births during the daylight hours. He tracked calving time in 1985 and found that 74 percent calved between 6 a.m. and midnight.

Every Thielen calf is identified with color-coded ear tags with the dam and sire's identification number when it is born. Calves with Angus sires will get white tags, Herefords get red, Simmental black and Red Angus will get yellow. Bull calves are tagged in the right ear and

heifers are tagged in the left ear.

Joe is also weaning calves earlier to let cows regain body condition before winter hits.

Weaning steer weights have increased

Oklahoma in November but this year because of dry weather they were unable to send cattle until January. In comparison, some years the wheat outgrows the grazing pressures of their

Date Weighed	Avg. Weight Steers	Sold Spring	Avg. Yearling Weight	ADG
11-12-86	482	1987	660	1.75
11-13-87	519	1988	718	2.00
11-17-88	515	1989	797	3.00
11-03-89	542	1990	832	2.70
11-16-90	570	1991	855	3.17
12-03-91	518	1992	817	3.50
11-12-94	472*	1995	817	3.00

*Thielen Beef calves in 1994 were 30 days younger than in 1986 and cows were still recovering from a very hard winter and poor summer grazing conditions.

from 349 pounds in 1974 to 570 pounds in 1990 for a 221-pound increase. In the four-year period between '87 and '91, their average yearling steer weight increased 195 pounds, from 660 to 855 pounds grazing winter wheat in Oklahoma.

Even though they have shortened the time the cow and calf are together their yearling weights continue to improve. Since 1991 they have calved later and weaned earlier so their weaning weights have slightly decreased in that time period. This management change was made to cut cow cost expenses and allow them to use nature's resources more effectively.

After weaning the Thielens sort the calves by sex and size before sending them to the Cherokee Strip in Oklahoma for winter wheat grazing.

Enjoying good gains, they have been sending their calves to the same place for 16 years. "The Cherokee Strip is some of the best wheat grazing country," Joe says. Their steers average gains of more than 3 pounds; some gain more than 3.5 pounds a day.

"I attribute that to good wheat, good genetics and good people taking care of them," he adds.

Flexibility is a key when raising cattle. They usually send the calves to

calves. "In our business you have to be flexible," Joe says. "If you are not, Mother Nature will pin your ears back."

Variety of Options

Flexible is also a way to describe their marketing program. They have many options to choose from. "We are trying to breed cattle that will perform and have the ability to grade and yield," Joe says.

Ownership is retained on all of the calves until late February or early March when the calves come off winter wheat.

They do finish some of their own cattle, sending them to a feedlot 100 miles south of Dorrance. The number will vary year to year, depending on the current feeder market and the outlook of profitability in finished cattle.

They also sell some of the feeders off wheat in Oklahoma at auction barns and some private treaty.

Improvements Add Stability

As the Thielens' ranch grew so has technology. They went from keeping cow records on note cards to on the family computer. They are already on their third computer system.

Originally they would borrow a scale to weigh calves from their county Extension office. In 1989 they installed a

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scale under their hydraulic chute.

Joe says being resourceful has been a necessity the last 24 years. After the severe snowstorm in the spring of 1987, when the Thielen ran out of places to keep the newborn calves, they built a fully insulated calf nursery (see sidebar story).

They have also built portable 12 by 24 foot calving sheds with four 6-foot-wide calving compartments. These can also be pulled to the pasture with the front gates adjusted so only calves can get into the dry pens.

Another project Joe and his sons have been working on is the building of a new facility for AI breeding and wintering cows. They have done all of the labor themselves, constructing a 24 by 36 foot shed, a chute that three people can AI out of, and a circular tub and a sorting alley that curves for ease in cattle handling.

Another new feature added to the Thielen ranch is a roller mill and bin system to hold grains for farm storage and to utilize such products as wheat midds and commercial proteins. "We've tried to make

it very versatile, we can use it for cattle feed in the fall and winter and for seed wheat in the summer," he says.

Joining Together

A strong believer in the grass-roots movement, Joe is active in several organizations. He is a member of the Kansas Livestock Association, currently serving as an at-large director, and is a past chairman of the cow-calf stocker council.

He served on a task force committee of the KLA and Kansas State University officials to examine the status

of Integrated &source Management (IRM) in Kansas. He is currently president of the statewide group that formed from that committee, the Kansas Beef Management group.

He is also a member of the American and Kansas Angus Associations, the National Cattlemen's Association and the Kansas Simmental Association.

Committed to the Future

The emphasis in the future will be on carcass data at the Thielen ranch. Joe says he'd like to receive more carcass

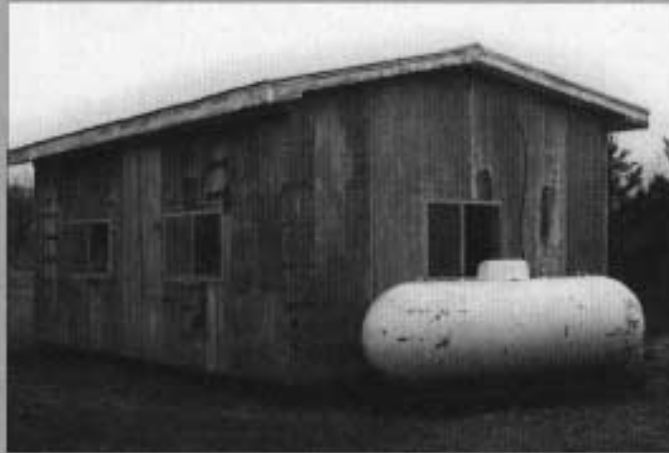
Resourceful Producer Builds Portable Calving Nursery

How often have you brought a calf into your home because of bad weather? I'm sure there is a time when you have been woken up by a calf that has somehow made it from the bathroom to your bedroom.

After the late spring snowstorm of 1987, when the Thielen ran out of places to keep their newborn calves, they built a 12 by 24 foot fully insulated nursery.



CHESTER PETERSON PHOTO



"It becomes the headquarters during calving season," Joe explains.

The nursery was built by Joe and his family with the assistance of a local carpenter. They built the shed on pipe skids so it could easily be pulled to any location. To heat the building they attached a 500-gallon propane tank and use an old heater out of the house. It also has a hot-water heater, bathtub and 17 cubicles to hold calves.

"It is a high-efficiency building," Joe says. "It doesn't take much fuel to keep the place warm."

Thielen also use the shed to make ear tags and to clean up OB equipment.

"I like it because if we are waiting for a cow to calve we can go in and warm up without having to take our shoes off," he explains. This home away from home even has a TV to watch while waiting for a cow to give birth.

(Above) This 12 by 24 foot insulated calving nursery is a warm shelter for baby calves.

(Left) Kevin Thielen helps warm a baby calf in the nursery built in '88.

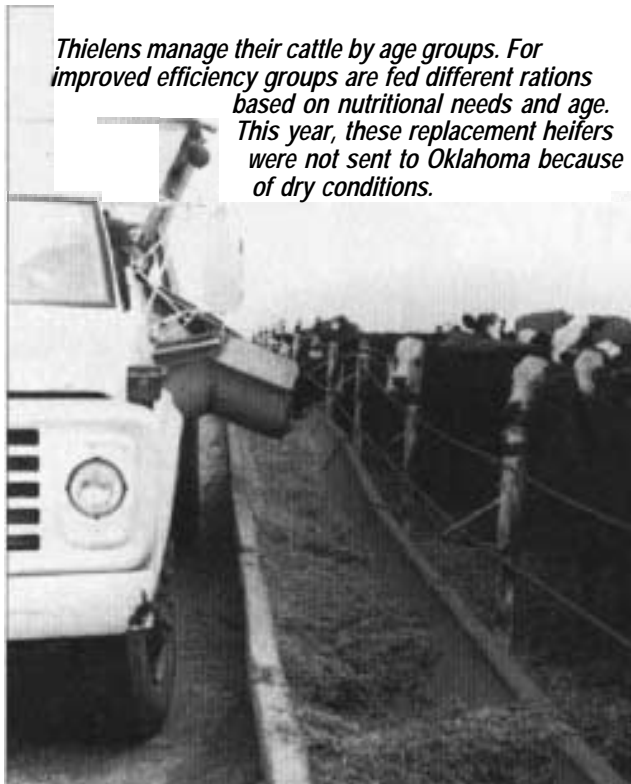
data back from his cattle. "It is hard to get information back," he says. "I criticize our industry for that. If we want to compete with poultry and pork we have to get our heads screwed on straight. We've got to stop chasing the fads. We need to base our decision making on facts and good genetics."

In his BIF award application Joe says this issue needs to be addressed. He suggested that BIF become instrumental in promoting the development of an identification system that would track animals from the ranch to the box.

The Thielens continually try to breed cattle that will perform and grade because they believe the time is coming when producers are going to be paid for their genetics -both good and bad.

He says vertical integration that occurs in the pork and poultry industry

Thielens manage their cattle by age groups. For improved efficiency groups are fed different rations based on nutritional needs and age. This year, these replacement heifers were not sent to Oklahoma because of dry conditions.



won't work in our industry, but that we do need better follow through with an identification system.

"Our industry needs to communicate," he explains. "We need to identify sire lines that are detrimental and get them out of the system, and we need to find the good sire lines and use them."

Although there are fluctuations and challenges year to year in the cattle business due to environmental and other changes, Joe is committed to producing **uniform** and quality cattle.

"Our goal is to raise cattle that will be nearly self-sufficient — that will go out and do it," he says. "I love this business, it is a great place to bring up a family and I love the challenges."