

# Georgia Producers Band Together To Promote Beef Quality Assurance

BY LISA HAWKINS MOSER

**P**roducing a quality product is essential to the success of any business. This is particularly true when speaking about the beef business as it competes with poultry and pork for the consumers' meat-buying dollar.

In order to gain market share through customer satisfaction, beef industry leaders have worked to educate producers on ways to produce the highest-quality product possible. One state taking a lead in the pursuit of quality is Georgia.

For many years, Southeastern producers were plagued with the perception that their cattle performed poorly in the feedlot. As a way to alter the perception, leaders of the Georgia Cattlemen's Association (GCA) created Georgia Pride, a health certification program. The Georgia Pride program was implemented in May 1993.

"Interest in the program has increased since it began two years ago" says Paul Wall, director of member services for Georgia Cattlemen's Association.

To enroll in the program producers contact GCA for the Georgia Pride tag order form. The order form asks for a complete health history on the calves to be enrolled in the



*This Georgia Pride blue-tag Anquus steer will be marketed with complete health and performance records.*

program. Once the application is complete, the producer and a local GCA Georgia Pride committee member sign the form for validity. The GCA staff sends out the appropriate ear tags representing the white, red, blue or green levels of certification. The tags are placed in the calf's ear so at the time of sale the buyer can see the tag and immediately know the health history of the calf. The cost for each tag is \$1.

To receive a white tag producers must identify the breed or breed cross of the sire and dam, have all male calves castrated and healed, have all polled calves or calves dehorned and healed, give nursing-calf vaccinations, make sure all heifers are open and have calthood vaccinations for Brucellosis, be a GCA member, and have

attended a Beef Quality Assurance program.

The red tag requires producers follow all the white tag specifications, plus have a controlled breeding season and use registered bulls with expected progeny difference (EPD) records.

The blue tag level includes the white and red requirements in addition to producers having the calves weaned a minimum of 30 days; bunk and water trough broke; vaccinated for IBR, PI3, BRSV, BVD and H. Somnus; and controlled for external and internal parasites. Also, the qualifying producer must have gathered carcass information on cattle in the past.

"The white, red and blue levels represent home-grown calves," says Wall. "We recently added the green level

for purchased stocker calves."

Green level requirements state producers must own the calves for a minimum of 45 days, plus meet all vaccination and preconditioning requirements.

Since the program began some producers have been using the Georgia Pride certification to help market their calves. Wall says experienced marketers are taking advantage of the Georgia Pride program.

"Producers participating in load lot or direct farm sales, where they have the opportunity to let the potential buyers know about the calves, are using Georgia Pride to their advantage," says Wall. However, he adds, some producers are disappointed in the program. "The unhappy producers usually tag a small number of calves; sell them through the local livestock market, without promoting the calves as Georgia Pride certified; and expect the calves to top the market that day," says Wall.

Wall believes producers are going to have to look at alternative marketing methods in order to receive payment for the value of Georgia Pride calves.

"In order to get the value for the calves, we will have to group the Georgia Pride calves in large enough numbers for the buyers," says Wall. He predicts there will be two markets for feeder calf in the future -reputation cattle of known genetic, health and performance backgrounds, and generic cattle.

In addition, Wall also foresees a regional or national



certification program. He believes this type of program would benefit the cattle producers as well as the order buyers.

"If we had a national program it would become the industry standard. It would also give order buyers who work across state lines a uniform certification standard to follow," says Wall.

### Partnership with Georgia Beef Challenge

Although Georgia Pride is a state-based program, it has gained national attention through its contributions to the success of another state program — the Georgia Beef Challenge. The Georgia Beef Challenge is a retained ownership cattle feeding program offered to the state's beef producers.

Among the Georgia Beef Challenge minimum requirements is a Georgia Pride white tag certification. The Georgia Beef Challenge steers are fed at Hitch Feeders II Inc., Garden City, Kan. By feeding in the Great Plains region, Georgia Pride calves have earned a national reputation.

Like the Georgia Pride program, the Georgia Beef Challenge also began in the early 1990s. Since its beginning, the Georgia Beef Challenge has been coordinated by Wall and Robert Stewart, Extension beef specialist, University of Georgia.

The first feeder cattle were shipped from Georgia to Kansas in the fall of 1990. On the first truckloads went 157 head representing 25 producers. Today, 1,112 head consigned by 67 producers are on feed at Hitch Feeders II Inc.

Hitch Feeders II Inc., has a one-time capacity of 45,000 head. General manager Bill Hogan says the feedyard is at about 85 percent capacity year-round. Because of its location in western Kansas, Hitch

## 6H Angus Farm Pursues Quality Genetics

One Georgia Angus operation taking advantage of the opportunities offered through the Georgia Pride and Georgia Beef Challenge is 6H Angus Farm, owned and managed by Walt and Elma Helmreich.

The Helmreichs have been involved with both of the Georgia programs, as well as the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Value Discovery Project, since their inceptions. The pursuit of carcass information has always been a high priority of the Helmreichs.

6H Angus Farm originated in Illinois, Walt and

the type of animal they are producing."

This year the Helmreichs entered 18 calves in the CAB Value Discovery Project and placed 20 calves on feed through the Georgia Beef Challenge. They follow the blue tag Georgia Pride recommendations for their herd, however they only tag the Georgia Beef Challenge calves. Because 6H retains ownership on the calves, Walt and Elma do not believe it's cost-effective to put Georgia Pride tags on the calves not required to have them. However, with a different



*Walt and Elma Helmreich, Crawford, Ga., have 20 Angus-bred steers in the Georgia Beef Challenge. They also consigned 18 steers to the CAB Program Value Discovery Project.*

Elma's home state, during the 1950s. The Helmreichs and their four children relocated to Crawford, Ga., in 1962. Over the years, their Angus herd expanded to 200 head. Now in their 70s, Walt and Elma have cut their herd size to 60.

The Helmreichs have always focused on producing an end product desired by their ultimate customer—the consumer. "It has been our goal since the beginning to raise a calf that will work for our industry. We haven't followed any fads, and we've always had carcass traits in mind," says Walt.

So when the opportunity to participate in the CAB Value Discovery Project and the Georgia Beef Challenge came along, Walt and Elma were quick to sign up.

"We initially got involved because we wanted to know where our cattle were carcass-wise. We feel both programs allow us to measure the important traits," says Walt. He and Elma retain the highest-quality bulls for breeding purposes, and castrate the rest of the males and enter them in one of the retained ownership programs.

Walt believes beef producers should send varying quality levels of the calf crop through the cattle feeding programs. He says that is the only way to get an accurate look at the herd's genetics.

"Some producers only send the top end of their cattle. That doesn't give them a true picture of their herd," says Walt. "Cattlemen need to send all their calves or the middle cut of the calves, to really know

marketing scheme Walt believes the \$1 per tag fee would be cost-effective.

"If I didn't retain ownership on my calves, I'd use the Georgia Pride program to help market them," says Walt. But, for the Helmreichs retained ownership is the market scheme of choice.

"During most years, retained ownership is more profitable than selling feeder calves, if you have quality genetics," says Walt.

The ability to produce profitable genetics has been

proven by 6H Angus Farm. Last year, the Helmreichs entered the top pen in the Georgia Beef Challenge. Their steers took top profit honors with an average carcass basis profit of \$74.28 per head. The pen also posted an average daily gain (ADG) of 3.94 pounds, and three of the four cattle graded Choice.

The success of the 6H herd has not been limited to the Georgia Beef Challenge. In 1993 one of the Helmreich's entries in the CAB Value Discovery Project claimed honors. Their pen boasted the third highest retail yield, fourth highest combined score, and fifth highest carcass merit per day on test. The pen recorded a 3.19-pound ADG, with four of the six calves qualifying for the CAB Program.

The Helmreichs are using the carcass data to plan potential herd matings. After seeing the quality grades of their herd, a goal was set to have all their cattle qualify for the CAB Program.

"Of the cattle we sent last year through the CAB Value Discovery project, 3 percent graded Select, and 97 percent graded Choice. Of the Choice grades, half of the calves qualified for CAB Program," says Walt.

The Helmreichs would like all their calves to grade middle or high Choice. For this reason, they're particularly interested in using sires with strong marbling EPDs.

Walt and Elma Helmreich, along with their fellow Georgia cattlemen, serve as an example of how producers are joining together to take advantage of available educational tools. And by doing so, they're improving the quality of the end product marketed to the consumer.

# Georgia Producers

Feeders II Inc., has four packer buyers for its cattle.

In addition to feeding Georgia Beef Challenge cattle, the feedyard also manages cattle enrolled in Mississippi, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky and Alabama state-sponsored cattle feeding programs. Hitch Feeders II Inc., got involved with the state programs because the feedyards' interest in working with producers retaining ownership.

"We were interested in helping with a program that teaches small producers about retained ownership. We believe the only way producers are going to get paid for their product is through retained ownership," says Hogan. "We thought once the producers learned about retained ownership, some might want to feed more cattle."

His prediction was correct. "We have several customers that put five head in the Georgia Beef Challenge to see how they compete against their peers, and then feed the rest of their cattle through our feedyard," says Hogan.

The profile of the Georgia producer Hogan is referring to is a commercial cow-calf operator with an average herd size of 30 cows.

For many producers the Georgia Beef Challenge provided their first contact with the feedyard.

"In the past, Georgia cattlemen were interested in knowing the type of cattle the market would prefer, but had little, if any, way to monitor how their calves continued to perform past the point of sale," says Stewart.

Therefore, the Georgia Beef Challenge was created. It is an educational program intended to inform producers about the product they are producing, says Stewart.

The Georgia Beef Challenge

is open to GCA members who are able to consign groups of five Georgia-bred steers. Priority is given to groups sired by the same bull with known birth dates, although multiple-sire groups are eligible. Producers may enter as many groups as they wish. It's recommended the steers be at least 550 pounds at delivery and preferably heavier. These guidelines are in addition to the earlier stated requirement that the Georgia Beef Challenge steers be Georgia Pride certified.

Beef producers interested in participating in the program are given two delivery dates at several locations around the state. "We use the last week in August for the fall-born calves, and the last week in October for the winter- and spring-born calves," says Stewart.

Just before delivery, producers supply program coordinators with a health history form and a non-refundable deposit of \$35 per head. The registration fee is the only bill the producer pays throughout the feeding period. Feed, veterinary expenses, yardage and any other costs are deducted from the proceeds of the cattle at slaughter.

Before leaving Georgia the steers receive an identification number, weight, and visual muscle score. An initial market value is established by *USDA Market News* representatives. This enables producers to compare the value of the same calf if it had been marketed as feeder rather than marketed as a finished animal.

Once the calves arrive in Kansas, they are sorted into pens based on predicted days on feed. This year, the Georgia Beef Challenge calves filled seven pens. Stewart, along with Hogan's advice, determines when to market the cattle.

During the cattle feeding period producers receive a

mid-term report with the intermediate weights taken on the calves when they are implanted with a growth stimulant. Final weights are taken approximately one week before the calves are marketed. Carcass data is collected on the steers through the National Cattlemen's Association Carcass Data Collection Service.

**After the marketings** complete, participating producers are sent a report with the final weight, carcass data and final carcass value. The final carcass value is used to determine profitability, and is calculated by using carcass weight, ribeye area, fat cover, quality grade, yield grade, and National Provisioner's "yellow sheet" carcass prices. The final carcass value less costs and initial steer value determines individual profitability. Group profitability is also calculated and included in the final report.

The cattle marketings are usually done between February and June. Following the final marketing in June, producers gather for a two-day educational field day with part of the discussion dedicated to the Georgia Beef Challenge results.

When determining marketing dates, Stewart tracks the supply and demand trends. Stewart says profitability varies depending on the year.

"In 1993, on average we made \$135 per head profit. Last year we made \$35 per head profit on average. I was more proud of the \$35 profit in the spring of 1994 because of the cattle market situation," says Stewart.

Aside from allowing producers to experiment with retained ownership, Stewart believes the educational benefits the Georgia Beef Challenge provides are helpful to producers.

"I'd say 99 percent of the producers are enlightened by the data," says Stewart. "You can always find something positive in the consignor's cattle, and then you can use that opportunity to show the producer where he can improve."

Stewart says he is also learning along with the producers. "I learned the upper one-third of our cattle are as good as any others in the country," says Stewart. The people in the upper one-third, are producers who have been using good, performance tested bulls in their operations for two to three years.

In terms of quality and yield grades, approximately 40 percent of the cattle grade Choice and 67 percent will have a Yield Grade 1 or 2. Stewart says the quality grades are lower than desired by the industry because of the exotic influences in the cattle.

"An exotic cross that gains 3.2 pounds per day and is at an acceptable weight at 15 months of age, has a hard time making the Choice grade," says Stewart.

As a way to decrease the amount of cattle grading Standard, Hitch Feeders II Inc. began using an ultrasound scanning system to better estimate optimum marketing time for the yearlings. "Since we started using the scanner, the percentage of cattle grading Standard has decreased," says Hogan. He and Stewart agree another way producers are decreasing the amount of Standard cattle is through improved genetics.

"Producers are using the Georgia Beef Challenge data to make their decisions on genetics," says Stewart.

Several producers have culled bulls and some of the more advanced producers started culling cows, working to develop a stronger genetic base.

AJ