

Better Together

Saluda County, S.C., is home to one of the few marketing cooperatives in the state. Made up of cattle herds numbering fewer than 50 head, producers needed a way to add value to their animals in the sale ring. This is where the Saluda County Cattlemen's Association stepped in 26 years ago.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor



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Upstate South Carolina is known for raising cattle, though very few of those herds are substantial enough to hold their own sales. Progressive thinking 26 years ago led to a marketing co-op continuing to build on its outstanding reputation year after year.

The Saluda County Cattlemen’s Association Replacement Heifer Sale held annually the fourth Saturday in February, is an avenue for individual sellers to add value to their females at market.

“Producers knew they did not have enough animals for their own farm sale, so they came together and made this co-op,” says Travis Mitchell, Clemson University Livestock and Forage Cooperative Extension agent and the man behind the curtain for the sale. “The Extension agent at the time, Phil Perry, selected the top females out of multiple herds and then sold them at the auction.”



Clemson Extension

Five years ago, when Perry retired from the Extension service Mitchell stepped in to fill his shoes. Mitchell’s duties for the sale remained the same as Perry’s did before him: screening the animals who go through the sale.

“I screen the heifers of course for conformation, but also for disposition. I make sure all the heifers have followed a rigorous vaccination protocol and the genetics match what the buyers are looking for,” Mitchell adds.

Essentially, Mitchell is the boots on the ground for both the buyers and sellers. The longevity of this sale fully depends on the reputation built and maintained between buyers and sellers.

“What is unique about this sale is my role in it really. I am an unbiased third party screening these animals,” Mitchell says. “I am hand picking these animals so the sale is not only uniform but high performing. That is how we build that lasting reputation, and the sellers reap those benefits because the buyers get a heifer ready to go to work for them from day one. That is what brings them back year after year.”

The sale relies on both repeat consignors and buyers, with animals coming from three surrounding counties. These heifers sell to South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia producers, spreading the high-quality Saluda county genetics far and wide.

“I am sure there have been pens that went further than that, but in my five years here they have not,” Mitchell says. “Plenty of the heifers are bought here and stay here.”

Between 20-25 consignors sell an average of 200 head each February to a crowd brimming the auction barn. Out of the 200 filling the seats, 35-40 leave with loaded trailers.

Cattle going through the sale are sired by Angus, Simmental, SimAngus, Gelbvieh, Balancer and polled Hereford bulls. Black hides are easily the majority at this sale, with heifers sold in groups of two to five head.

There are some call-in buyers, but mostly they are all in-person sales. Mitchell says he is working towards an online presence for the sale. He firmly believes progressive planning is the only way to move forward with any business endeavor, especially when marketing livestock.

Steers steal the show

Twenty-six years ago, cow-calf producers in Saluda county, and surrounding states, calved in the spring. The sale was strategically placed around that. This put the sale right at the time producers had money in their pockets for replacements and they would sync up with their calving interval.

“When we started seeing herds in the southeast transition to fall calving, we started offering both bred and open heifers on the sale,” Mitchell says.

More than 20 years ago, two steer sales were added by the association at the recommendation of Perry. It mirrors the heifer sale in the screening process for high-quality livestock to build uniform pens for sale.

“Basically all the same people are involved with the steer sale,” Mitchell says. “The steers are brought

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into the sale yard and we mix them all up to make uniform truck and tractor loads of cattle.”

Every seller follows a strict vaccination protocol and the steers are ear notched to check for BVD. Roughly 1,000 head sell in August and 500 in November. However, the steers sell mostly to the Midwest to feedlots for finishing.

Most herds in the Saluda area are no bigger than 50 head, making it impossible for producers to fill an entire truckload to sell. Both the steer and heifer sales allow producers to get those value-added prices.

Through the screening process, every animal is guaranteed by a veterinarian. Mitchell and the Saluda County Cattlemen’s Association stand behind every animal sold through these auctions.

“Our consignors are honest, down-to-earth, hard-working people who come together and put on a high-caliber sale,” Mitchell adds. “They want to sell quality cattle so buyers can add value to their own herds.”

Why a co-op?

Mitchell says in this day and age, producers should be looking for progressive ways to market their cattle

“If producers are using the right genetics and following the right vaccination protocol, the only way to get value-added prices for their cattle is to find unique marketing opportunities,” he says.

Mitchell believes both the steer and heifer sale is an ideal network to get producers premium prices for their premium cattle. Sales of this nature in the area are few and far between, making Saluda’s auction unique in multiple aspects.

“The consignors pay close attention to their genetic selections. One of the best seedstock producers in the country, Yon Family Farms, LLC, is a big source of the genetics we sell,” Mitchell says. “Yons also consign some cattle since they are members of the association and live in Saluda county.”

Moving forward, Mitchell says his goals always come back to providing a quality product for sellers.

“We want to make sure we are providing cattle who can go out and make producers profit,” Mitchell adds. “We are trying to achieve this by constantly improving our genetic selection and overall herd management.” **AJ**



Screening heifers for conformation and docility is what makes the Saluda County Cattlemen’s sale unique and ultimately adds value for the buyers. Travis Mitchell screens animals for the sale.