

Taking Care of the



Willow Creek Ranch looks down the line for success.

by **Laura Nelson** for *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

In the Highwood Mountains, quality-driven cows are at the top of a supply chain that can quickly snowball.

"It can be tough on the rancher. We do all this work out here, calve them out in the weather, take good care of them; we've got to get the ball rolling. Everyone else depends on us," Todd Prosser says from atop a hillside already blanketed with snow in early September.

Prosser manages Willow Creek Ranch with wife Charla northwest of Belt, Mont. The ranch has been owned by Roy and Diane Volk for close to 60 years, with the Prossers leading for the past two decades.

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cows, we're going to have less sickness in the calves down the line," Prosser says. "We have to take care of the cows. That's where it starts. They're the money makers."

Taking care of the cows doesn't mean pampering them, he's quick to point out. It's more about preparing them. Cows have to forage at the base of this central Montana range in the winter months, where they hold off feeding hay until three weeks prior to the start of calving Feb. 1. About that time, the

mothers get a round of shots to keep calf scours at bay and a tetracycline boost in their mineral. Young cows get a protein block right after calving to keep them going.

Still, as weather permits, they're only feeding half or a quarter ration, and relying mostly on leftover forage from strategic spring and summer grazing.

"The calves bunch up a little when you're feeding, but then they get back out there with mama and are looking for grass," Prosser says. "I like when we're not feeding them a lot in the winter. I think that helps with sickness, too, because the cows are a little more scattered."

Taking care of the money makers doesn't leave room for excuses, either.

"I cull pretty hard," Prosser says.

When it's time to ship calves to their long-time feeding partners at Loseke Feedyard near Columbus, Neb., they evaluate and sort off the bottom 40 steers and heifers before loading the trucks.



Moneymakers



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“I don’t send them anything I wouldn’t want — calves that don’t fit the bunch, maybe they’re not as big or fleshy, or they have an ear down,” Prosser says. “I just want to make sure we don’t send anything that would ruin the partnership.”

If a calf is in the bottom 40, Mama’s got to go. Then, they have to pass body condition

score inspection at the pregnancy exam and a reference check on their calving performance.

“If she’s thin, she’s gone. If I have to suckle a calf, that cow’s gone,” he says. With only two guys to look after 800 to 850 cows, calving issues are a pretty sure ticket off the ranch, too.

“I want my cows to have a big calf, but we don’t have calving problems. We just don’t pull many calves here,” he continues. “This herd has an awesome set of udders on them, because I cull every year at shipping, just based on calving records.”

A balancing act

What comes out of those cows is a balancing act, both in calf characteristics and the bottom line.

“Weaning weights are very important to us, because that’s where we make our money, but these calves are also pretty good under the hide, too,” Prosser says. They have to maintain that growth beyond weaning. Bulls on Willow Creek Ranch must have a proven 1,200-pound or better yearling weight to pass on to calves.

“They have to perform after they leave the ranch, too,” the cattleman says. “We want performance for me and for them, but I also don’t want my cows getting too big, because we do run them a little rough.”

That balancing act works there in Montana, and it creates calves that work at the feedyard, too.



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Ryan Loseke has been buying and feeding the Willow Creek calves for the 18 years Prosser has been at the management helm.

"They're just good, rugged, mountain cattle," Loseke says. "Todd's quick to get on the phone and stay in touch through the feeding phase. He wants to know if there are health problems and if there are things we need to do."

Setting the cows up for success is the first step in getting calves that do well on the ranch and beyond. Willow Creek calves are preconditioned with a full suite of immunizations a month prior to shipping.

"I just found through the years that two weeks doesn't seem to be enough, based on what I see in the replacements we keep," Prosser says.

"The biggest thing on those big groups is a health advantage," Loseke says. "They work well and get those precondition shots in them a month before they get here. That's where we can impact health at the feedyard, is getting them set up for success with an immunization program at the ranch."

While solid preconditioning programs are more common on the ranch these days, 15 years ago Loseke called Willow Creek "pioneers in their preconditioning program. They never did balk at it, even though it meant running those calves through a second time."

A dollar saved is a dollar made

For the Nebraska feeder, being able to buy a group of 350 steers and 250 heifers from one quality-focused ranch means consistency

in the feedyard and their bottom line, too.

"They're predictable from a health standpoint and a carcass standpoint. I think consistency is the biggest draw for us," Loseke says. "Good communication on a good set of cattle makes a big difference. We know what they've done, and we don't have to revaccinate 'just in case' when they arrive."

That's a dollar per head saved, Loseke says. He and his wife, June, are both veterinarians in combination with their feedlot duties. They know even a slight drop in mortality rates makes a big difference. Health treatments in the feedyard take a bite out of quality grade performance and their ability to market calves on a quality-focused grid.

That all matters to Prosser.

"You want them to make money, too. If it helps the feeder and the packer in the long run, it's probably going to be worth it. You'll get a premium for your calf," he says. "We have to keep that ball rolling when it gets down the line for the next guy. Everyone's got to make money or none of us would do it."

In his first year at Willow Creek, Prosser had a purebred rancher ask him to mark sire-specific groups to collect feedyard data on calf performance. The Losekes complied, and for the next six years, they compared calf carcass performance to sire selection.

"We started just doing it for the purebred guy," Prosser says. "Then when we started seeing what was happening there, a guy gets pretty interested in it."

No doubt, those numbers were interesting. The first year marked a sire group with a 16% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand

acceptance rate — about the national average at the time — but 25% of the calves dropped into the Select grade category. A couple of years later, in 2001, one sire group graded 100% upper-Choice, 91% CAB and only 9% of those were a yield grade 4. Conversely, in the same year, another sire group in the same shipment had a 39% CAB acceptance rate and 10% Select.

Not exactly the consistency that met the eye. Prosser started paying closer attention to intramuscular fat (IMF) scores and ribeye expected progeny differences (EPDs) on his bulls, with the goal of not compromising his other established production traits.

"You want the meat quality to be good, too, because we need people to keep buying beef," he says. "People pay for a good steak. I get frustrated when we do go out to eat and you get a steak and it's not what you expected."

A decade later, those numbers reached a more even keel. Groups of 125 to 170 head consistently hit CAB acceptance rates of 38% to 50% in 2012, 2013 and 2014, marking no less than 91% Choice and better in those years.

That's good, but Prosser still thinks they can do better.

"I've got 15 years of climbing the ladder here. I just want to keep raising good cattle — good looking cattle, that matters, too — but it would also be pretty neat to see that CAB percentage go up to 75%."

He's excited to see the results of this year's calf crop, now on feed at the Loseke yard.

He took the windfall of record calf prices a couple years ago and reinvested in some upgraded matches for his moneymakers.

"I was able to take those years and spend a little more money on some new bulls, so I'm excited to see how those pay off," he says.

He admits, watching that numbers game can be frustrating.

"Some of those really good bulls, they bring a lot of money. And sometimes, the calves that are a lower quality bring just as much money as the good ones at the sale barn. I don't know how to fix that," he says, "but I do know that I'd rather be raising good cattle than mediocre cattle."

Having a long-standing feeding partner helps, too.

"That's worth it," Prosser says. "You've just got to keep moving forward."



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Editor's Note: Former industry information specialist for *Certified Angus Beef LLC*, Laura Nelson currently owns LCN Communications, Big Timber, Mont.