



PHOTOS BY STEVE RUTHER

Cowboy Observations

Montana feeder-rancher sees what works.

by *Miranda Reiman*

Eric Moore knows that opportunities arise from challenges.

The Solaris Feeders manager says dry weather in Montana was the impetus for a management change in the Miles City operation, which is also into ranching.

“We started early weaning three years ago because of drought,” Moore says. “If I could find enough customers to do it, I wouldn’t wean a calf here after the first of October, with that cold drizzling rain and all the stress.”

Solaris buys heifers of known Angus genetics from customers and artificially

inseminates (AIs) them to calving-ease bulls at the feedlot. Then they are sent out to the ranch southeast of town where they calve in April and May.

By the time those early-weaned and backgrounded calves are delivered, the heifers are bred back to registered Angus bulls. Moore sells the premium-value females to make room for the next round of heifers in a continuing cycle.

“We do what the big boys don’t want to do — calve heifers and wean high-risk calves,” he says.

Dry conditions may have sparked the

idea, but since then, Moore has turned early weaning into a niche.

“We kind of specialize in weaning three-weight calves,” he says. “We wean starting on July 15, including some 60-day-old calves.”

Calf stress levels and health improve with the younger calves, Moore observes. “With early weaning, the calf is young enough that he still has maternal antibodies through the milk, the branding shots are taking effect, and he’s on a high plane of nutrition.”

Not to mention the resources are better during midsummer.

“He’s on greener grass and better water, instead of waiting until October when he’s eating sagebrush or drinking water out of a cow track,” Moore says.

That reservoir water can get stale, too.

“The secret to making a health program work in this country is water,” Moore says, citing a report from South Dakota State University. Research on reservoir water quality reveals increasing sulfate levels as it gets later into the summer and fall.

“It can get like poison by the first of September. Their livers are so depleted that none of the trace minerals are working right,” Moore says. “The vets I’ve talked to say when trace mineral availability in the body gets all tied up like that, you might as well just put that vaccine on the ground at processing.”

Early weaning theory

Wearing the hat of a feedlot operator, Moore would like more customers to send him early-weaned calves.



▶ Many calves enter the 8,000-head feedlot, but how many it finishes depends on the market, Eric Moore says. “The backgrounded Angus-influenced feeder cattle we sell are always in high demand.”

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“This is just a cowboy observation, but maybe the younger calf that is getting a higher percentage of his diet from milk than he would in October is better set up for grain feeding,” he ventures. “He’s got less of a fiber-digesting rumen and more of a starch- and sugar-digesting abomasum. When we start him on a concentrate diet, he doesn’t have the adjustment stress that a calf eating a whole lot of forage might get.”

“That stress could be just enough to push the older calf over the edge and make him sick,” Moore says. He developed the theory during a three-year stint with Continental Grain in Kansas. “We’d start

thousands and thousands of calves, and the easiest to start were Holsteins. They found a lot of other reasons to die, but they were always easy to start on feed. You can push them right along and they never seem to get acidosis or back up on you.

“It made me wonder if a younger calf has an easier time getting on feed,” he says.

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Solaris became a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedyard in 2000. It has maintained a 17.4% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance rate on enrolled cattle, plus 1.9% U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Prime.

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The feedlot staff spend a good deal of time sorting cattle to help them reach maximum efficiency and to hit the right market date.

“Anything over 200 head we’ll sort at least four, usually closer to five times,” Moore says. “Those little toads that don’t grow an inch and are hog-fat at 1,050 pounds (lb.) — your conversion’s about 30-to-1 — get them gone. But it makes no sense to take a calf that’s 1,100 lb. and still gaining 5 lb. a day at that time. Put 200 more pounds on him.”

The same philosophy applies to put-together groups of feedlot-owned cattle. Individual arrival weights are compared with their midterm weights. Cattle with average daily gains (ADGs) in the bottom 15% to 20% are sorted off.

“We put them in a pen by themselves and their gains will double,” Moore says. “That tells me it’s all mental for them. Nothing genetically or physically wrong with them; they are just slow to come to the bunk.”

Moore hopes that getting closeout and carcass information back to his retained ownership customers will help them make improvements.

“With data you can do a lot on the cow side,” he says. “Get rid of the cows that give you the Yield Grade (YG) 4 Select, the YG 4 at 900 lb., the light carcass. The grid calls for the 800- to 900-lb. high-Choice or Prime carcasses.”

Hitting that target is yet another challenge from which new opportunities arise. They’re called premiums.



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