

No More Mud



Hoop barns help this South Dakota family operation create a better feeding environment for cattle.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

PHOTOS COURTESY OF VANDERWAL FARMS

Mud isn't something drought-plagued producers have dealt with in a while. However, with the weather extremes that ag producers have become accustomed to, it's a sure bet that mud will be a problem again soon enough.

It was mud that prompted the VanderWal family, which operates a small custom feedlot in eastern South Dakota, to look at installing two hoop buildings over existing cattle lots. The two barns were constructed at the end of 2009.

"Our lots are really flat, and we don't have the best drainage," says Scott VanderWal. "There's a lot of mud when it's wet."

VanderWal explains that with the steel-framed, polyethylene fabric-covered structures, the cattle in their feedlot are always under a roof — meaning they are protected from winter weather and are in the shade when it's hot. As a result, "You are able to take some weather out of the equation," VanderWal says.

VanderWal Farms Inc. is located west of Brookings near Volga, S.D., and is a multi-generation family operation. In addition to their feedlot, where they finish their own cattle and custom-feed cattle, including Angus genetics, the family also grows corn and soybeans and does some custom-harvesting.

► **Above:** Mud prompted the VanderWal family of South Dakota to install two hoop buildings over their existing cattle lots.

Pros and cons

In making their decision to add covered facilities to their feedlot, VanderWal explains that they already had a covered slat barn facility that was built in 1978. They liked the covered facility — and the manure to use as fertilizer from the pits, but didn't think the cattle performed as well on the concrete slabs, so they looked at other options.

VanderWal says they opted to go with hoop barns instead of a monoslope facility. While price is comparable, they thought

the hoop barns offered better lighting and air quality. The fabric covering on the hoop barn has a 15-year warranty, but could last longer depending on weather conditions.

The two hoop barns were built where the VanderWals' existing feedlots were. Because of a gas line running between the lots, they were not allowed to put a structure over that area. Instead, they put shipping and receiving pens in between the two barns.

Each barn is about 70 feet (ft.) wide by 194

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► **Below:** Scott VanderWal reports performance of the cattle has been "really good" since they began using the hoop barns; however, he admits they have been labor-intensive.



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ft. long, and can house about 325 head per barn.

Also, because they placed the barns over existing lots, they are oriented north and south. Scott says an east-west placement is recommended to allow for summer breezes to help cool the cattle. The VanderWals have addressed that by using large fans along the sides of the barns to help with air movement.

Overall, Scott reports, performance of the

cattle has been “really good” since they began using the hoop barns.

That said, the barns have created new challenges, too. Scott notes that bedding the hoop barns is more labor-intensive.

“We put a lot of cornstalk bales up in the fall,” he says.

As for their existing covered slat facility, they have added a rubber mat product over the concrete slats and are extremely happy with the improved performance of the cattle.

“We didn’t know this rubber-mat product existed when we built the hoop barns,” concludes VanderWal, who will begin his 11th year of serving as president of the South Dakota Farm Bureau in 2014. “If we had, we would’ve considered digging a pit below the hoop barns.”



Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is a cattlegirl and freelancer from Whitewood, S.D.*