



►Left: Stanley Watts believes in a sound herd health program, both for the benefits for his herd and for buyers.

Practicing What He Preached

Georgia cattleman makes health a priority, not just for his herd's sake, but for his buyers, too.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

During all the years he was in the purebred business, veteran cattleman Stanley Watts preached to his commercial customers about health programs. Most didn't listen.

"Ninety percent of them sold through stockyards, and all they wanted to do was put them on a truck and send them on," he says.

Since 2004, though, Watts has been cattle manager at Chokee Plantation, a commercial cow-calf operation in Leesburg, Ga.

"I've learned what my commercial producers go through," Watts says. However, he's still just as adamant about the importance of a sound herd health program.

"There are so many

sectors in the cattle industry. You've got to consider the ones beyond you. The order buyers and feedyards have to make some money from those cattle."

With a goal of sending healthy calves on to the next stop, as well as making sure his own herd stays healthy and productive, Watts starts his health program with the cows.

"We vaccinate them in July and August, two to three months before they calve. I feel the timing on the vaccinations gives us some clostridial immunity. Plus, if we wait until they're open we have to get up the baby calves and that is a stress on them."

He uses Bovi-Shield® FP5 + LV5, which controls bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) Types I and II, infectious bovine rhinotracheitis



(IBR), parainfluenza-3 virus (PI₃), bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV) and five-way leptospirosis (lepto) and vibriosis (vibrio). In addition, he gives Spirovac, which provides protection against a different strain of lepto. He also uses Ultrabac® 7/ Somubac® for the clostridial diseases as well as *Haemophilus somnus*. In addition, he deworms with a pour-on product that also provides short-term fly control. The cows are dewormed again in the fall and in March or April with an injectable product.

Bovi-Shield is a modified-live virus (MLV) vaccine, which has the potential to cause abortions in cows. To guard against that, and to comply with label instructions, Watts administers the vaccine only to open cows for the first two years. After that, it is safe to give to his pregnant cows.

University of Florida Animal Scientist Todd Thrift agrees with his use of MLV vaccines.

"The research data shows MLVs give higher levels of immunity, they are generally longer-lasting and do a better job of controlling disease. They cause less tissue reaction and less injection-site damage. The only disadvantage is they are more sensitive to heat and sunlight, so they need to be handled accordingly."

Calf health program

Watts starts the health and management program on the calves the day they are born with an injection of Vitamins A, D and E.

"At some point we may vaccinate against scours," he says, "but we really haven't had a problem yet. We doctored maybe 10 calves out of 550 this past calving season."

Calves are also tagged with both their dam and sire's number.



►The cows and calves at Chokee Plantation are on a comprehensive herd health program.

Preconditioning: Practicing what he preached part II

As part of both sale requirements as well as his philosophy of providing the next owner with a quality product with profit potential, Stanley Watts preconditions his calves.

"If we send them to a feedlot without being weaned or vaccinated, a good percentage of them will contract a virus or infection. Their systems can't take that much stress."

Watts, cattle manager at Chokee Plantation, starts by introducing calves to feed, normally half soy hull pellets and half corn gluten pellets, the day they come off the cows. Although they start off only eating 2 to 3 pounds (lb.) per head per day, the Leesburg, Ga., cattleman says they'll be eating 10-12 lb. per day by the time the trucks come 50-60 days later.

"We do it partly to get them bunk-broke so eating out of a feedbunk isn't a strange situation when they go to the feedlot," Watts says. "If we do it right, they'll make a little money, too. The first week they lose weight because they are fretting. After they settle down they gain weight and will average 1.5 to 2.0 pounds a day."

"Preconditioning is a two-pronged approach. It helps the guy selling them and the guy buying them."

University of Florida Animal Scientist Todd Thrift agrees.

"There are massive benefits health-wise to preconditioning. With the original vaccinations plus a booster, you can get the full level of immunity in 45 days. Plus you can get him past missing his mama, get him used to eating and drinking out of a trough and you can start to adjust his diet."

Thrift continues, "They'll perform better in the feedlot, they'll have less sickness and the death loss will be lower. As a result of less sickness, some studies have shown they'll grade better."

"We know preconditioning works," states the animal scientist. "It is more of a question of economics. If you're selling calves through a special sale or retaining ownership, there are huge benefits to the producer just from controlling shrink. Here in the Gulf Coast a bawling calf is subject to losing 5% to 10% of his weight if he is marketed through traditional channels. That is potentially 40 to 50 pounds. If they are preconditioned, it is closer to one-half to 2%, or 5 to 10 pounds."

The calves don't go through the chute until they are between 90 and 120 days old. The males are castrated and implanted, and both males and females are vaccinated with Bovi-Shield FP5 + LV5 and Ultrabac-7.

"We don't deworm them at this point, but we may start to do that," Watts says.

"We work them again at weaning. We use the same protocol, the same vaccines, re-implant the steers, and deworm them for the first time. Three or four weeks later we vaccinate them again."

For the past five years he has also taken ear notches from all the calves to test for persistent infection (PI) with BVD. However, since all mature females have already been tested, as well as any bulls that are brought in, Watts' veterinarian says he can safely forego the ear-notch test on the calves.

Replacements

When he makes his first selection for replacement heifers, which is usually around 90 days after weaning, he gives them another

booster of Bovi-Shield FP5 + LV5 and Ultrabac 7. Thirty to 45 days before they are bred, he gives them another round of Bovi-Shield and Ultrabac 7, plus Spirovac, and he deworms them again.

"Our replacement heifers are in the same environment as the cows, so we want them to have the same health protection," Watts says.

The health program does take a cash investment. Watts estimates the cow vaccinations and dewormers run around \$8 to \$10 per head.

"We expect those cows to make a profit for us," he states. "If we don't provide for their health, we can't expect it. Pregnancy rates are extremely important to profit. It takes the profit from seven or eight calves to make up for on open cow."

The cows and heifers repay Watts for their comprehensive health program with annual conception rates between 95% and 98%.

Watts also uses the vaccination and deworming programs as insurance policies. He manages 650 females on 650 acres and says health problems could spread rapidly if they entered the herd.

Calf vaccinations, implants for the steers and dewormers cost around \$15-\$20 per head. Watts says there is no doubt the investment pays. Because of both his meticulous health program, as well as the quality of the straightbred Angus calves, he is able to market them through the Southwest Georgia Feeder Calf Association's version of the Southeast Alabama Feeder Cattle Marketing Association (SAFE) sale.

This past fall, 80 Chokee steers averaging 620 pounds (lb.) brought \$1.15 per hundredweight (cwt.). Watts compared their price to the highest-priced steers sold the same week through Georgia stockyards. The Chokee calves beat out the stockyard calves by \$63.90 per calf. When he compared the



► University of Florida Animal Scientist Todd Thrift says preconditioning saves producers dollars by minimizing shrink.



price of the Chokee calves to the price of average steers sold through the stockyard, the Chokee steers brought in \$108.62 more per head.

"When the buyers find out what we're doing they'll pay a little more for the product. Then the costs of the vaccines and labor is repaid," Watts says.

"We've developed a reputation," he continues. "We've used eID (electronic identification) tags from the start because we want people to know where these cattle come from. The last two years an order buyer in Illinois bought all our cattle for farmer-feeders in his area. He's been really, really happy with them."

