
Animal Science

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TEAM EFFORTS REQUIRED FOR SMALL TENNESSEE PRODUCERS

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Tennessee's cow-calf producers must come together to form production and "marketing teams" or alliances to market their feeder cattle. This is a problem for many producers because they must break with tradition and give up their "independence".

"Coming together" means that small producers must cooperate in their breeding, production, health and marketing programs as well as calving season to produce uniform load lots of feeder cattle. Without working together, these small producers can put together only a small number of feeder cattle at one time. And these calves are usually born over 4-5 month period. Changes need to be made that will increase the numbers of uniform cattle that can be sold in lot sizes that buyers find attractive.

The nation's 1.2 million cow-calf operations have about 38 million cows. This is an average of 32 cows per operation. Approximately 45 percent of the U.S. cow-calf operations are in herds with cows from 1-99 head. Seven percent of the nation's cows are in herds of 300 or more. So, the cow-calf industry is composed of a majority of small producers.

Tennessee's cow-calf industry is comparable to the nation's. The average size herd in Tennessee is 24 head. There are 45,000 producers. With these numbers, most of the state's cow-calf producers can only sell 16 to 20 head of feeder cattle. So, 85 to 90 percent of the state's producers sell their calf crop at the local auction market. With this number of calves, marketing opportunities are limited.

However, if 20-25 Tennessee cow-calf producers can work together and develop a program with similar breeding, health and management programs along with a common calving season, they can put together a trailer load (50,000 lb.) of steers and heifers that would attract buyers. This option will work. But it will require cooperation among producers and working with a local marketing concern.

Another option to market feeder calves is comparable to the preceding except the alliance would cover a larger group of producers and calves would be gathered at a local marketing agency where the calves would be grouped into uniform lots and offered for sale. For more than 50 years, results from Tennessee organized feeder calf sales have demonstrated the improvement in market price by grouping to increase the number of head per lot offered for sale. With the addition of a uniform health program and weaning programs, the calves will be even more attractive to buyers. In addition, when 1500-2000 feeders can be offered for sale at one location, it will attract a greater number of potential buyers.

The latter alternative has worked well for members of the Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf Association, the Giles County Alliance, a recent sale conducted at the Dickson County Livestock Center and the Tennessee Beef Advantage Sales.

In the past year or so, other alliances that offered calves for sale that have had similar health programs and grouped calves to increase the number per lot have also demonstrated extra “added value” for the feeder calves.

For those Tennessee cow-calf producers that would like to “add value” to their feeder calves, they need to work together. It will require producers cooperating on genetics,

management, health and marketing as well as giving up independence, but they will be rewarded.

No, it will not be easy and marketing will not be convenient, but producers will be rewarded for their efforts if they stick together and work toward their goal, an improved market price for their feeder cattle.

For more information in feeder cattle marketing, contact the Agricultural Extension Service, University of Tennessee office located in every county in the state.

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