

Finding Links in the Value Chain

Jeff Ryan
Cresco, IA Producer

Jeff Ryan and his family run a diversified operation in Winneshiek County in northeast Iowa. In addition to a mix of corn and alfalfa, they also operate a cow-calf herd of just under 100 head of commercial cows. The cowherd originated from their dairy operation in the 1970's. Jeff has been in charge of the beef portion of the operation since age 14 in 1982. That's when he initiated an artificial insemination program to improve genetics of the cowherd. A scale was added the following year to measure feedlot performance.

The cattle complement the rolling terrain of northeast Iowa. Row crops are raised on the contour with an extensive system of connected waterways throughout the fields. Hay from those waterways and other fields has traditionally been used for the Ryans' cattle operation, but a switch to late-spring calving in 1999 enabled Jeff to begin selling a larger portion of his hay production to local dairy and beef producers. Some hayfields have been converted to Management Intensive Grazing (MIG.) Mature cows begin calving in mid-May for 60 days and are rotated among several paddocks of varying sizes and topographies. Winter feed for the cowherd is typically made up of baled cornstalks.

After graduating Iowa State University with a BS in Animal Science in 1990, Jeff began using an estrus synchronization program on both his mature cows and replacement heifers. A timed mating system of 5-Day Co-Synch with CIDRs was begun in 2009 on mature cows.

In the mid-1990's, Jeff began doing structured sire evaluation for the American Angus Association and A.I. companies. Each year, females are randomly mated via A.I. to two young test sires and two proven sires. Progeny are fed to harvest weight and carcass data is collected at the packing plant to be used by bull owners for carcass EPDs. A similar program with Simmental sires was begun in 2008. Natural service sires are put in with cows following the timed A.I. protocol. Open females have been used as recipients for high-end dairy donor cows.

All calves are individually identified at birth. Extensive records are kept in both book form and on Excel spreadsheets. That has enabled Jeff to make use of Age & Source Verification premiums when marketing cattle. Fed cattle have been marketed on a value-based grid since 1996. The data collected has given Jeff the opportunity to evaluate bulls and females and reach a target end product that generates substantial premiums in a value-based marketing system. The majority of cattle have been marketed through US Premium Beef since 2004. Some are also direct-marketed to consumers through local lockers.

The goal of the Ryans' beef operation is to utilize as many of their own resources as possible to create a high-quality end product that can be marketed at a premium. The cattle are viewed as a way to enhance the value of the corn and forage raised in the Ryans' operation while maintaining good soil conservation practices.