

Cattle Business in Mississippi – August 2004 “Stocker Cents” article

Stocker Production in Mississippi

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Stocker cattle are generally considered young, lightweight calves developed primarily on forage-based diets until they reach a desired weight. These calves are usually then placed in a feedlot or used as replacements for cow herds. Mississippi is primarily a cow-calf state with over 20,000 beef producers. A substantial number of producers retain their calves and/or purchase calves for stockering before shipment to the feedlot. In a recent survey, Mississippi producers indicated that they retained/purchased over 195,000 calves for stockering each year. Calves were purchased in all months, with over 60% of the calves purchased in the third and fourth quarter of the year. Producers indicated calves were purchased at an average weight of 409 pounds and sold at an average weight of 679 pounds after a 145-day stockering period. The increased value of production from stockering exceeded \$29 million dollars annually. Stockering is a vital part of Mississippi's beef industry and economy.

What makes an ideal stocker calf?

Unfortunately, we cannot look up “ideal stocker calf” in the dictionary and get a prepackaged answer to this important question. Is a particular breed combination the formula for success? Does management at the cow-calf level play a role in the future performance of a calf through a stockering phase? Where do health and nutrition considerations come into the picture? How important are market conditions in answering this question? Will the ideal stocker calf for one farm be the same for the farm down the road?

Consider this definition of the ideal stocker calf: a calf that has the potential to be profitable under a planned management program and the anticipated market conditions. Can we effectively predict which calves will be profitable as stockers? There are tools that can help with this. Breakeven analysis is one such tool that can help producers with stocker purchasing, production, and marketing decisions. Effective risk management can play a vital in profitable stocker production as well.

Stocker health management

Weaning calves and moving them to a new location to start on a feeding program is the most stressful event in their lives. Many stocker operations purchase calves in relatively small groups and combine them for efficient feeding and management. Both the stress of a new environment and the exposure to multiple animals from other farms present

even the best calves with a strong disease challenge. Health problems negatively impact animal and economic performance of the farm; therefore, managers need to spend time planning and evaluating the individual obstacles faced by their farm to manage for the best results.

The receiving phase is a critical control point for prevention and minimization of calf diseases. Protocols should be planned with knowledge of common diseases and effective management measures. After the calves arrive, treatments may need to be initiated based on specific disease processes. The best way to assess the effectiveness of an arrival and treatment protocol is through documentation and evaluation of the health management program. Not all preventions or treatments work in all regions or situations and a good record system and analysis allows producers to make knowledge based decisions regarding which modalities work best on their individual farm.

Today's consumers are more and more concerned about food safety. The beef industry has an obligation to provide a wholesome product that is free from residues that might be associated with antibiotics, pesticides, or any other on-farm chemical. Using drugs "off label" increases the chance of volatile residues in calves and invites further regulatory scrutiny. For example, antibiotics such as gentamicin and neomycin should not be injected into cattle due to their long withdrawal time and food safety risk. We cannot afford to view food safety as a "feedlot" problem and not do our part to make sure that animal health products are used appropriately. Consumer confidence that beef is wholesome and healthy is paramount to continued profitability.

Forage systems for stocker cattle

The ability to grow forage for most of the year in Mississippi offers a great opportunity for growing stocker cattle. Using forages is easily the most cost-effective way of growing beef, however, forage management practices that improve the utilization and quality of forages are necessary to ensure that this value is captured. The "Stocker Cents" articles will include forage and nutrition topics that discuss management practices and provide methods to help Mississippi stocker cattle producers to grow calves in a profitable way.

Forage management in a stocker cattle operation differs significantly from the cow-calf systems. In a cow-calf system, the production status of the cow can be used in managing forage supply. For example, a spring calving date can be planned for that allows the use of abundant spring forage growth to meet the needs of milk production and raising the calf. Then forage intake can be reduced and hay fed to the herd during the winter when forage supply is short. However, in a stocker cattle operation forage intake cannot (or at least should not) be restricted at any time to ensure that target weight gains are achieved. In addition, forage quality as well as the quantity can be more of a concern when growing stocker cattle. It is very hard for young cattle to grow on hay or pastures that have become too mature and lost their nutritional quality. Therefore, management practices must strive to provide a consistent supply of quality forage.

“Stocker Cents”

Over the coming months, “Stocker Cents” articles will address topics relevant to producers actively involved in or considering stockering calves in Mississippi. Forages, nutrition, health, management, marketing, and economics are just some of the areas that will be covered. The goal is to make sense of stockering issues to make cents add up for Mississippi beef producers. For more information on stockering, contact your local Extension office.