

Empowering Women in the Cattle Business

Dr. Brandi B. Karisch – Extension Beef Cattle Specialist, Mississippi State University

The face of farming and the beef industry is changing. We've all heard the statistic that farmers are getting older (average age of 56 years), but many are not aware of the growing amount of cattle farms with women as the principal operator. According to the 2012 USDA Census of Agriculture, 66,174 beef cattle farms were operated primarily by women, and in Mississippi 29% of farmers are women representing 3,173,970 acres. Many of these women farmers are actually older than the average farmer (average age of 60 years), and are often fulfilling a dream of being involved in agriculture after a successful family or career. Many of these farmers were either not raised on a farm or have not farmed for many years, and are often starting from scratch with contagious enthusiasm.

Step in to any Animal and Dairy Science department across the country, and you'll quickly notice the rise in the number of female undergraduate students compared to several years ago. Women in this field have a passion for agriculture, and for many this dream means pursuing a career in veterinary medicine. However, there are many students who have a desire to jump in to the beef industry, which has been a male dominated field. We are hearing more and more reports from industry leading companies discussing the high quality of female applicants who have gone on to be great hires for their companies. These women are thinking outside the box about how to be involved in the beef industry and are doing a great job.

A friend was recently recognized for her and her husband's accomplishments on their farm by the American Farm Bureau Federation, winning their Achievement Award. This award recognizes young farmers and ranchers who have excelled in their farm or ranch and have demonstrated superior leadership skills as well. For these winners, the majority of their income comes from production agriculture, and is subject to normal production risk. The competitors are evaluated on their excellence in management, growth and scope of their enterprise and self-initiative that have been displayed throughout the farm or ranch. Several things make their farm unique and highly worthy of this award, but perhaps most relevant to this article is the fact that she is the everyday labor force behind the farm, while her husband maintains an off farm job. I certainly admire the fact that they built and grew their farm themselves, and run a successful commercial cow/calf herd, along with stockers and a grass fed beef enterprise. She certainly serves as a great example for women in the beef industry to follow.

Often times we find that when we put on a hands on workshop, we get a lot of enthusiasm from female cattle producers, but they're often hesitant to jump in to the hands on activities with the zeal of some of their male counterparts. One of my colleagues from North Carolina State came up with a program designed to combat some of this hesitancy, but creating an all women cattle handling workshop. This program has been highly successful in North Carolina and has recently expanded across the southeast.

The Southeast Cattle Handling and BQA for Women Producers Workshop that is designed to promote self-confidence for women in the cattle industry by providing hands on training in a no pressure setting. This course is scheduled for April 5 and 6 in Verona, MS, and is limited to 20 participants. The goal is for this course to be very hands on and provide a small group setting conducive to asking questions and learning. Each day will kick off with some classroom sessions

to lay the foundation for the hands on portion of the course later in the day. Beef Quality Assurance principles are a big part of the foundation for this program, and will be the focus of day 1. The classroom sessions will feature a BQA lecture as well as discussion of media training. Beef media training is also a big part of day 1. Telling you agriculture story is especially important as consumers become more removed from the farm. Hands on sessions include cattle handling, chute side training, one on one media training, and reproductive and calving issues. There will also be an opportunity to network with other participants throughout the day as well. The second day of the workshop focuses on vehicles and equipment. Tractor and trailer driving can be intimidating for many producers, and a hands on session on day 2 will focus on giving attendees the opportunity to practice their skills. Another important piece of equipment is the tractor and implements that go along with it, and the second breakout session will focus on tractors and equipment. The final breakout session of day 2 will cover fence building and repairs.

To attend the workshop, an application form must be submitted by March 8 and those selected to attend the workshop will be notified by March 16. Applications and a complete schedule can be found at extension.msstate.edu/beef.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit extension.msstate.edu/beef.