

Herd Health Pays Off

By Ellen Humphries Brisendine

Six years of a planned herd health program at Circle X Land and Cattle Co., Ltd., have reduced death loss, increased weaning weights and have generally improved the functioning of the commercial and registered Brangus herds north of Bryan.

Manager Steve Densmore contracts a year's worth of medicines and supplies from companies such as Pfizer and Fort Dodge, taking advantage of the technical support their technical veterinarians offer. He also works with two local veterinarians, Steve Schulze, Franklin, with whom he has a long-standing relationship, and Trey Skiles, 11 miles away at Hearne, to plan and implement the Circle X herd health program.

And, he says, owners of any size herd can benefit from the knowledge readily available from the same types of sources he uses.

Circle X, owned by Jerry Bullin, who lives on the ranch, encompasses five properties. "Everything is within an eight-mile radius," Densmore explains. The five contiguous ranches are Vista Ridge, Spring

Valley, Persimmon Creek, Bobcat Bottoms and Windy Hill. These properties are home to more than 400 registered Brangus and a large herd of commercial Brangus females.

"This ranch is set up so we do as much ourselves as we can," says Densmore, who came to the ranch in April 2000.

"We do our own haying and our own pesticide control. We buy fertilizer in bulk and have our own system of spreading it ourselves. We don't have to pay that per acre spreading fee."

Like most business managers, Densmore dislikes haggling over prices for supplies. He heard from another Brangus producer about a program Pfizer offered, working with the American Veterinary Association (AVA), that would allow Densmore to determine his animal health supply needs for a year and then lock in a price.

The products could be purchased when needed and at the most convenient location. "This takes all that hassle out of it. There are three or four similar

Morning mists rise off the pastures at Circle X.





There are no horses on Circle X Cattle Co., Ltd. Densmore prefers to work cattle calmly, with a feed bucket and four-wheeler. Here he talks with Clint Buckland and Tyler Hill about moving a group of mature cows to another pasture.

Densmore (can) determine his animal health supply needs for a year and then lock in a price.

programs out there to use,” he says. “Just find the best deal,” for your level of use, he recommends.

In the first few years, Densmore says his budget for medications and supplies probably qualified him for the professional-level discounts – in the \$25,000 to \$30,000 range. “But, I’ve dropped back down to about the \$15,000-level now. I buy from both Pfizer and Fort Dodge. Both make products I like.”

According to Densmore, one company offers volume price discounts with each purchase and the other company offers a year-end rebate.

“When you fill out the paperwork for those programs, you list who you buy your medicine from so the drug companies know how

to track it. It works out really well.”

Treatment plan

The calendar for vaccinations and treatments starts before the calves are weaned. “The calves get their pre-weaning shots a couple of months prior to weaning.

On the first round they get Pre-sponse[®], which is for *Pasteurella*, then they’ll get ‘7-way’ blackleg. Then, usually ‘5-way’ Lepto, Vibrio, Triangle 4, which is all the respiratory.”

Calves get their second round of shots at weaning. “I usually go to ULTRABAC[®] 8. Then Triangle



Circle X is home to a large herd of commercial Brangus and more than 400 registered Brangus cattle. In times of scarce rainfall, Densmore culls the herd based on productivity, not strictly on age.

9, which has the *Haemophilus somnus* in it for the second round on weaning.

“As a general rule, I’ll deworm everything we’ve weaned. I know there are studies out there that say if you are in hot, dry areas, there’s no point in deworming cattle. Whether it does good or not, it makes me feel better,” he says. “I truly think the cattle do better if you deworm.”

The cows are dewormed twice a year, spring and fall. “I’ll use DECTOMAX® in the spring and Cydectin® in the fall. I swap the wormers, because if you use the same one over and over, the parasites tend to build up an immunity to it.”

The registered Brangus cattle are not implanted, but the commercial cattle are, even the heifers. “They will be implanted with Synovex® C,” he says. “I even implant the commercial heifers because Synovex C is labeled for use in heifers and it allows the heifers to gain weight just like the steers, but it doesn’t affect reproduction.”

Technical assistance

Densmore has several years of practical experience managing cattle herds, but he still seeks technical assistance from the drug companies, and relies on them to help provide educational events for his clients. Representatives from Fort Dodge came to Circle X to speak at a Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) meeting Densmore hosted. He also asked his veterinarian to attend and help.

“We invited all our customers and did a program showing what it does to the calf if you don’t inject an animal properly,” he explains. A chronic calf had been euthanized. Using dyes in the syringes, “we injected wrong, on purpose.” After the incorrectly administered injections, the animal was autopsied to show the damage. Densmore says it was a valuable learning aid for the guests, who seemed to enjoy the opportunity to learn.

Densmore has found that anytime he or a colleague has had a problem or needed professional advice, the pharmaceutical companies have been a ready and willing resource. “They are more than willing to bring somebody in to help you if you’re having a problem. They will bring in a specialist in the problem you’re having. That’s another good thing about working well with not only your veterinarian, but with your medicine supply company. We all have to work together to make everything work,” he says.

Beneficial results

This herd health program has paid off in remarkably lower death loss, at the ranch and in the feedlot. “Since I’ve been here, our death toll is less than two percent,” he says. They’ve gotten good reports back on the cattle they’ve sent to the feedyard, “because they are in good health. We have retained ownership on some we have at Diamond Feedyard in Hereford. Out of the 500 they’ve probably treated two or three for sickness and we’ve had one death.”

“Our genetics have improved,” Densmore says. “Every year we try to put better bulls on our cattle. When they start being born in the spring, you can watch the progress of the calves and every year it seems our calves have gotten better and better.

“Maybe I’m prejudiced, but these people wouldn’t be coming back to buy these cattle if the quality wasn’t there,” he says of both the breeding stock and the feeder cattle buyers.

Not all the commercial offspring go to the feedyard. Heifers are sold off the ranch, private treaty.

“We used to send a lot of the heifers to the feedyard. Now we retain the top 10 to 15 percent for our own use. Then the others we’ll sort and sell as replacement heifers. We were missing quite a bit of income because replacement heifers will bring a little

more money than feeder heifers. That has increased our sales quite a bit.”

Circle X markets about 700 replacement heifers and enjoys good support from local buyers for registered bulls. “When I first came here, they had a fair bull market, but it wasn’t very strong. We’ve really developed a good bull market in this and the surrounding area. We get a lot of repeat customers with our bulls.” Many of the repeat buyers are past customers of Densmore’s when he managed other ranches.

Densmore will sell cattle in groups of any quantity or one at a time. “I get a lot of repeat customers from that. Once you get people out there who have your cattle, and they are happy, they are going to tell other people and that’s going to generate more customers.”

Clients seem to enjoy driving through the ranch to look at the cattle. “We can stop, walk through the cattle at their leisure. They seem to enjoy that more than sitting in front of a sale ring having to make a decision on the spur of the moment.”

Besides, one of the joys of Densmore’s day is taking visitors through the herd. “I love talking about the ranch. I think we’ve made tremendous progress with our cattle over the last six years.”

New use of ultrasound

This is the first year Circle X has retained ownership on steers sent to the feedyard. “Normally, we have been selling our cattle to Caprock, now Cargill Cattle Feeders. They’ve been buying our cattle for several years.”

He has received carcass data from the feedyard cattle and has found the commercial Brangus groups have been producing 50 to 60 percent Choice carcasses. “These cattle have fed well,” he says. “We have very few no-rolls. The cattle we have on feed right now are probably the best group of steers we’ve ever raised. If they don’t come back with really good

numbers, I'll be totally shocked."

Densmore grins when asked which grid the Circle X steers will sell on. He'll work with the feed-yard manager to pick the best marketing option, but to further reduce risk, he's hired Donnie Robertson to ultrasound the steers. "You can ultrasound steers about middle way through the feeding process and it will sort those cattle three ways — cattle that are not going to make the grade; cattle that are going to grade well; and cattle that are in the middle of the road. It will tell you approximately when you need to sell those cattle."

This new use of ultrasound technology costs Circle X about \$2 per head, but "if it takes a lot of the guess work out, it's worth it," he says. "This is our first venture into retained ownership and we need every advantage we can get."

"If we can go in here and know how these cattle are doing about midway through the process, then it's still a gamble but it's not nearly as big. If you have cattle that are going to be no-rolls, dump them right now. They are not going to get any better and it's just going to cost you money to leave them on feed," he explains.

"Plus, you're going to be sending the right kind of cattle to harvest at the right time. I think it's a process people can catch on to."

By-product feeds in drought times

Rains have been scarce but sufficient this year at Circle X. Still, Densmore is feeding a mix of by-products to help support the herd. "We're feeding rice bran, corn gluten pellets and cookie crumbs out of Houston." At my chuckle, he says the crumbs offer fat and protein. They also get cottonseed during cotton ginning season, since they are in the cotton belt of the Brazos Valley area.

The commodities are stored in bays in a barn, loaded into a mixing truck and augered back out to the cattle. The truck has a built-in scale to weigh out the

proper pounds of feed for the number of cattle in the pasture.

Keep some of the older producers

Another drought management tool has been to cull the poor performers. "We've gotten critical when we palpate cows. We have a lot of cows with a lot of age. We sent a load of old cows that missed a calf last year to the packing plant — nine to 12 years old. All our fat open cows are gone. We'll do more of that and this is the time to do it," he explains.

Even though many of the open cows were older, Densmore says he has learned to not cull the entire category of older females in times of drought. "If a cow is eight to 10 years old, pregnant and in good shape, I'm not going to get rid of her. Those cows have been through this kind of weather and they know how to handle it. A lot of people make the mistake, in my book, of selling the older cattle and keeping the younger cattle. The younger cattle have not been through this. It's a lot harder on them to go through a drought from a reproduction standpoint. If they haven't been through one, it will take them another year to breed back.

"If you go through there and sell the eight- to 10-year-old cows no matter what, you're selling cows that are tried and true and are used to this weather. They will go through this weather and come out on top a lot better than a young heifer will," he explains.

Test the bulls

Another way to maintain peak efficiency, and to provide a sound product to the client, is to conduct breeding soundness exams (BSE) on bulls. "We do BSEs on all bulls every year," Densmore says. And they've started vaccinating for trichomoniasis. "Our vets told us they were seeing more trich in the area. We hadn't had it, but as a preventative, we started vaccinating for trich. If it's out there, I don't want to get it

in the herd," Densmore explains.

"With our health program, we try to anticipate everything coming down the pike. We won't sell anything we're not going to stand behind," he says.

Herd health is for every herd

A herd health program is for every producer, and Densmore tries to give clients with limited facilities a helping hand. "I will talk to our clients about our herd health program, and when we sell cattle, I will give the cattle all the shots they need for at least the next six months before they leave the ranch. They are protected for that long."

"You need a vet to pull a calf, to brucellosis- and tuberculosis-test. Everything else can be done by somebody with a little bit of knowledge," Densmore says. "There are very capable people out there to help with a program. Most veterinarians will be more than happy to sit down, explain a health program and help a new rancher set up their program. Whether you have one or 100, you really need to work with a vet."

"You can get what medicines your herd needs, in the dosage you need at the feed stores, for most of these medications. Whatever is prevalent in your area, sit down with the veterinarian and get recommendations as to what he thinks needs to be done and go from there.

"A good health program is the first thing you need, first and foremost. That's the first thing I instituted when I came here and it has paid off."

Editor's note: For a complete herd health calendar, see the January 2006 issue of The Cattleman, pages 11-12, or visit www.thecattlemanmagazine.com and click on Herd Health Calendar.■