

Virginia Hereford Association Makes A Big Comeback!

Jennifer Showalter and Country Folks Mid-Atlantic Farm Chronicle

Blacksburg, VA – The increasing popularity and interest in the Hereford breed was quite evident at the 2009 Virginia Hereford Association Field Day. Around 150 people from Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia recently traveled to Virginia Tech for the opportunity to sit in on educational seminars regarding the Hereford breed, view Hereford and black baldy cattle from breeders across the state, and simply visit with other fellow Hereford enthusiasts.

Many breed associations are guilty of getting in a rut and focusing solely on producing purebred cattle, but Hereford breeders across the country are stepping back and looking outside the box at the potential that the Hereford breed has in crossbreeding programs.

Much of the day focused on the added benefits that the Hereford breed has to offer for commercial cow/calf operations. Craig Huffhines, Executive Vice President of the American Hereford Association (AHA) and Jack Ward, COO and Director of Breed Improvement for the AHA shared valuable insight on the Hereford breed and the cattle industry in general.

Huffhines encouraged each and everyone at the field day to get involved in protecting their way of life by joining the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). "There are significant issues in Washington, D.C. that are threatening the way we do business. We are going to have a long haul. We have to pull together because we are a minority," said Huffhines.

Huffhines pointed out that energy, lack of genetic diversity in the beef industry, and political uncertainty are the three biggest challenges he sees facing the beef industry. He went on to suggest ways that producers can work on diversifying their genetic gene pool. According to Huffhines, Angus cattle encompass upwards of 70% of the commercial cow herd and every continental breed has injected Angus into their breed with the exception of Charolais and Herefords. Not taking anything away from the Angus breed, he explained that this has led to a diminishing level of heterosis in many commercial cow herds.

Huffhines pointed out several other challenges and opportunities that the beef industry is facing. In 2006, 20% of the U.S. corn crop was diverted to ethanol production, while in 2009, 34% will be used for ethanol production. The increasing use of corn for ethanol production has definitely made for some dramatic changes in U.S. agriculture but has also opened up additional opportunities.

Huffhines brought the crowd to reality, as he explained that fat cattle have dropped \$10 per hundred weight since last year and the demand for beef is down 8%. He then went on to suggest that even though there are a list of challenges facing the beef industry, the demand for Hereford semen is increasing rapidly and there is beginning to be a narrowing in discounts at the market for Hereford cattle. According to Huffhines, Hereford breeders are sitting in a good position because producers all over the country are realizing the potential of black baldies.

Ward took the opportunity to visit with the crowd on ways to maximize their success by understanding and using EPD's. He emphasized that everyone wants to produce the perfect animal and that is nearly impossible to accomplish because everyone has different goals. Ward worked his way through a set of EPD's and made sure everyone understood what each component means and how it is established. He informed the crowd that the Hereford Association has added heifer calving rate and survivability to their EPD's to help make selection that much easier.

Even though EPD's are a great tool, Ward warned those at the field day to not get so tied up in the numbers that they forget to evaluate how the cattle are phenotypically. He encouraged the Hereford producers to continue to strive to produce cattle that the industry demands, because if commercial producers buy a Hereford bull to use on their Angus based cows and something goes wrong with the baldy calves, they are almost always going to go back and blame the bull.

While the adults learned to better utilize EPD's, Dr. Dan Eversole, from the Department of Animal and Poultry Sciences at Virginia Tech, discussed animal nutrition with the junior members. The youth learned such things as what different by-product feeds are generated from, how to read a feed tag, what levels of crude protein and total digestible nutrients (TDN) are best suited for different stages of a cow or bull's life.

Eversole stressed that too often show cattle are fed the highest quality feed and hay, which is often detrimental to their production down the road. "The biggest problem I see is that there is not enough fiber incorporated into heifer diets. You are better off to feed a lower energy feed and not feed more than 2% of their body weight in feed. Heifers get too fat and then they have trouble getting bred," said Eversole.

Dr. Scott Greiner, Virginia Tech Extension Animal Scientists, wrapped up the series of lectures by encouraging producers to take advantage of the added benefits of crossbreeding. According to Greiner, producers need to aim to produce cattle that calve by the time they are two years of age without difficulty, wean a valuable calf each year, are adaptable to the environment, and optimize revenues versus costs of production over a long productive life.

By cross breeding, Greiner suggested that improvements can be seen in fertility, survival to weaning, birth weights, weaning weights, and longevity. More calves weaned per cow during her life time quite simply means more pounds for producers to sell. "Profitable beef enterprises will successfully optimize the potential associated between higher levels of production/value and increased costs," said Greiner.

"My impression is that most attendees left with the sense that the Hereford breed is poised to have a very positive impact on the commercial beef cattle industry. This appears to be especially true in most areas of the country, such as here in Virginia, where the commercial beef cattle herds consist mostly of black cows from primarily Angus breeding. The economic advantages gained from cross breeding Hereford bulls to these black cows will not continue to be over-looked by commercial cattlemen. As more and more research and farm experience documents the increased weaning weights, improved fertility and efficiency of the Hereford/Angus cross, the demand for high quality Hereford bulls will increase. This is good news for the Hereford breed and the cattle industry in general," said Sid Rogers.

The field day was an excellent opportunity for Hereford breeders to come together, visit with each other, and work together to come up with ways to better the future of the breed and the industry in general. "We are exceptionally pleased with the turnout and positive comments. From people I talked to, they found it informative and interesting. Craig Huffhines and Jack Ward are really nice guys who know how to get the message across. The VHA is really trying to become more active for the Hereford breeders by holding events such as this, our sales and the junior show we started two years ago," said Jerry Hart, Secretary/Treasurer of the VHA.

Form more information on the VHA, visit www.virginiaherefords.org.