Turner's Heifer Haven

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Located 10 miles west of Hartville, Missouri, on Highway 38 in Wright County, Turner's Heifer Haven consists of 220 owned or leased acres. Of that 220 acres, 155 are in grass and grass-legume pastures, with the balance in woods. On this acreage, we currently have 300 head of Holstein and Holstein-Jersey cross heifers which we are contract-raising for four dairy operations. We have been growing dairy heifers for seven years, two of which were spent managing the 1995 Wright County Heifer Development Project for the University of Missouri in Columbia. During the next two years, we contract-raised heifers for a central Missouri dairy exclusively during the pasture-growing season. The past three years, we expanded to our current numbers, contracting with four dairies for a year-round program.

Animals are received weighing 250 pounds or more. They are returned to their respective dairies 60 days before calving or earlier, depending on prior arrangement with each dairy. All heifers are vaccinated before arrival with 7-way Blackleg, IBR, PI3, BVD, BRSV, 5-Lepto, Haemophilus somnus, and Pasteurella. Also, all heifers are de-wormed, de-horned, and all extra teats removed prior to arrival at our location. All of these criteria are covered under contract. Once heifers reach our location, all animal health issues become the grower's responsibility. Bio-security is an important issue for clients, so we disinfect needles between uses or use disposable needles, as well as using individual sleeves for breeding and pregnancy checks. We also continue vaccination and de-worming programs as needed.

Currently, we sort heifers into six management groups: receiving cattle, 300 to 450 pounds, 450 to 650 pounds, 650 to750 pounds (MGA group), 750 to 900 pounds (breeding group), and the bred-heifer group. Monthly weigh-ins facilitate both sorting and record-keeping.

Heifers must weigh a minimum of 750 pounds and be a minimum of 49 inches at the hips before our AI breeding program can begin. The owners provide the semen for breeding and pay a one-time breeding fee for each heifer of $25. We breed heifers as many as three times, if necessary. Heifers who fail to settle after three services must be removed by the owner at his earliest convenience. We use estrous synchronization as part of our breeding management, feeding MGA at 0.5 mg./head/day for 14 days before administering a shot of prostaglandin 17 days later. Chalking the heifers' tailheads when we inject the prostaglandin helps us with heat detection. We use the AM/PM method of breeding after standing heat has been detected (e.g., standing heat a.m.= breeding p.m.) For 1998 and 1999, our first-service conception rate was greater than 75%.

Heifers are weighed monthly to assist us with nutritional decisions as well as sorting into management groups. Monthly weigh-ins also allow us to report the progress of heifers to the dairies and to generate billing each month.

The Heifer Haven forage program is designed around a management-intensive grazing system (MIG). We use alleyways for cattle movement from water sources to paddocks. The alleys also allow us to move cattle to the corral working area with ease. Paddock sizes vary according to production potential and pounds of cattle in each group. Generally, we move cattle to a new paddock every two days, although that may vary to from one to four days depending on growth of forage within each paddock. The Heifer Haven philosophy is that we use animals to manage forage, not forage to manage animals. Our goal is at all times to maintain high quality forage in front of the heifers in a quantity sufficient to meet their dry matter intake needs. A more finely-tuned adjustment between quality and quantity of forages means less grain supplementation is needed to achieve our growth goals.

MIG systems are designed to maximize both the quality and quantity of the forages produced on any given acreage. Forage quality is controlled with timely rotations which prevent pastures from reaching unacceptable stages of maturity. (Mechanical harvest may become necessary.) Variables affecting the quantity of the forage include moisture, fertility, stand density, and seasonal growth patterns. Paddock size determines pounds of cattle it will support for any given period of time. MIG benefits to the animal are obvious: high quality forages in sufficient quantities yield maximum daily gains. The economic benefit is lower cost per pound of gain because of reduced grain supplementation. Benefits to the forage themselves include less stress for the plants as well as more rapid re-growth. The economic benefit is lower cost per pound of dry matter yield because of reduced fertilization. (Heifers spread that stuff naturally.)

Our water system consists of buried water lines as well as above-ground lines. We buried more than 4,000 feet of water lines in 1998 and foresee burying another 3,000 feet before our system will be complete. Having water located properly enhances our ability to utilize pasture while easing management restraints and adding flexibility to the system.

At Turner's Heifer Haven, our goal is to provide contracting dairies with healthy, 1150 to 1200-pound (seven-months bred) springer heifers with enough frame and body condition to calve at 22 to 24 months of age (1250-1350 pounds). The finished product must be the result of a win/win situation for both grower and producer--a contract that is profitable for both parties.