Beef Management Class Includes Field Trip

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ELVERSON and GLEN-MOORE (Chester Co.) — Lectures, panel discussions, an on-foot, on-rail evaluation, and hands-on learning experiences are all part of a beef management short course offered by the Berks County cooperative extension.

Besides beef producers and industry representatives, speakers included Penn State extension agents, veterinarians, and scientists. Organizers conducted the class Thursday evenings in March and April.

Lecture topics included beef breeds, records, evaluation, herd health and diseases, buildings and facilities, reproduction, AI, sire selection, nutrition, forage selection, tax considerations, and marketing.

The seminar moved outdoors on Thursday evening, as participants traveled to Glen Oak Farm, Glenmoore, and Cedar Meadows Farm, Elverson.

Participants included not only those interested in learning the beef trade but also experienced beef producers looking for new ideas.

Livestock extension agent Cheryl Fairbairn acted as a tour guide during the evening.

Tour participants were able to hear about the operation of lifetime farmer Nelson Beam, who farms 600 total acres, besides his cattle feeding operation. Three quarters of the acreage is in corn, with the balance barley rotated back into soybeans, in addition to a small amount of hay.

"Corn uses up a lot of phosphorus," said Beam. "The biggest source of manure is the hogs, so we try to balance the crop with the nutrients we have available," he said. Beam finishes 4,500 hogs per year.

Every farming operation requires adjustments and change, and a recent change that Beam considers especially beneficial is the removal of siding of the barn. The replacement was curtains that can be lifted for greater ventilation or cooler temperatures. The screen has proven to be an asset, he said.

"My philosophy is that whenever I get extra money I buy something I'm going to get a return on," he said. "In my business, that's the necessary way to go."

A new TMR mixer, for example, was an investment that he believes will pay for itself in a year.

"We can push the cattle up to a high-grain ration sooner," he said. "It enables the rumen to digest feedstuffs a lot better." Besides high-moisture corn, corn silage, and barley with molasses, Beam also adds cookie meal, or bakery waste, to the ration. He feeds the 200 head of cattle twice a day.

"It makes it a lot easier to feed," he said. "Before, it was always a guessing game. Also the cattle used to fight to get to the bunk to get the first pickings because they were separated." Now, he said, the cattle seem to know the ration is consistent and the animals are not as competitive at the bunk.

Each animal is double vaccinated. "We don't buy anything that isn't vaccinated," he said. "We just found that it doesn't pay."

The group also discussed heifers, which Fairbairn said lend themselves to the freezer trade, since the smaller carcass weight is ideal for consumers. Beam beds his cattle mostly with corn fodder baled on the farm. However this varies according to availability and price of alternative bedding.

"I always feel that you have to look at the long-term goals," said Beam. "You have to determine where you want to be 10 or 15 years from now."

Since 1988, when Jay Heim, Glenmoore, purchased his first Angus cattle, the beef business has been a continual learning experience.

Heim's acreage is divided by a road with 70 acres on one side and 200 on the other. "I've been developing this grazing system for 10 years and now I'm getting a lot of things down, so I'm expanding," he said.

The 35 acres used as pasture are divided into 10 paddocks. The system is not intensive, so the cattle are moved every three days to one week.

Heim has adapted the schedule to his lifestyle and job schedule. "I'm not always here at 3 o'clock when the cows are hungry and I'd rather waste grass by moving

Nelson Beam, left, discusses feedlot beef with class participants at his farm in Elverson.

them ahead before the pasture is finished than have them hungry.

"It's a little different to manage with the spring flush," he said. "I let them graze a little off the time and move them on quickly to start grazing it down. If I wait until the grass is really strong, by the time they get to the last paddock the grass is old." Heim plants pasture with grasses of differing maturation rates for that purpose.

Using an ATV to reseed the paddocks works best when the cattle are in the pasture and can "hoof it in," he said.

Water dictates pasture area and location, and Heim's water sources include springs, a pond, and piped water. A lane runs along the back of the paddocks to funnel cattle from one pasture to another.

Heim is moving from a crop/cattle/hay operation to more of a grass-based operation. To accomplish this he is using multi-purpose seed mixes of hay and pasture grasses. For example instead of harvesting hay during a dry period, he may turn the cattle out on the field.

Across the street, participants visited a former intensive feedlot that is now used to winter heifers and one of the herd bulls. Also at the location is a cow/calf herd in the surrounding paddocks. A chute and cattle handling facility, a two-man operation, is also present for loading/unloading and processing needs.

Part of developing and perfecting an operation involves change and improvement. "Every time we use this system I think of something I want to change," he said. "There's always something to improve upon. We learn as we go."

Heim is experimenting with sorghum sudan grass and millet.

The farm's acreage allows him to renew the pastures. "Right now I have more pasture than cows," he said. "That gives me a chance to renovate without having to worry about not having enough grass."

Calves that grow quickly and put flesh on, especially on a grass-based operation, are part of Heim's goal. "If I can produce a nice set of calves that do that and all look all the same, I feel good about that."

The calves are acclimated to a small amount of grain so they are familiar with the bunks "and ready to go" when they move into the feedlot.

"The grain isn't poured on," said Fairbairn. "Just so they know what feed is and they know what's going on. When they hit the feedlot they are really ready to put the pounds on."

In the barn is a compact handling system that includes a squeeze chute and electronic scales. Here Heim castrates, vaccinates, and measures weaning and yearling weights which help him to make culling decisions.

"It's very hard to work without weighing cattle," he said. "You can look at them but you don't really know how they're doing."

The curving passageways allow for less stress on the cattle.

Additionally, the catch gate faces the door of the barn, so the animals are walking into sunlight. "Once they have been through here once, they just walk right through," he said. "Nobody gets upset — including the calves."

Producers Learn To Evaluate Animals, Meats For Quality

Extension agent says meat butchers in major chain stores may soon be a thing of the past.

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LEESPORT (Berks Co.) — Beef and pork producers should know what consumers look for in the meat they buy.

To teach producers how to identify those qualities in both live and dressed animals, Clyde Myers of Berks County extension recently offered a three-session "on-foot on-rail" evaluation course.

"You need to have a mental picture of what ideal animals look like," Myers told the group of about 25 who attended the first session Monday evening.

It is becoming more important that producers meet the call for consistent meat quality, according to Myers.

"The market is demanding the traits they want from these animals," he said. "(Producers) will be asked to produce a more uniform product."

With pork, consumers have clearly shown they want leaner cuts than they did in the past. Beef, however, can be a greater challenge. While consumers say they want lean beef, they might not be willing to sacrifice consistent flavor to get it, according to Myers.

It is a challenge to produce lean cuts of beef that are consistently flavorful and tender. The USDA grading system demonstrates this, still designating as "prime" those cuts that show a high degree of marbling — fat — within the meat. It's that marbling that makes the juiciest and what many consider the most flavorful steaks.

The other factor used in USDA grading of beef is the age of the animal at slaughter, but that is difficult to assess from the cuts, Myers pointed out.

"Maturity is probably more important than marbling for determining tenderness, but it's difficult to tell maturity before 30 months of age," he said. This leaves marbling as the chief factor for determining the USDA grade.

The challenge of producing lean, tender beef can be even greater for those who finish beef on grass and direct-market it, according to Myers. One way for these graziers to assure tenderness and good flavor is to have

the animals slaughtered relatively young, such as at 15 months of age, he said.

Myers urged direct-marketers to become knowledgeable about evaluating meat quality, both on-foot and on-rail.

"You need to know your product if you're going to direct-market," he said.

The demand for product consistency in the broader market is partly because supermarkets are rapidly losing their own meat processors, Myers noted.

"Probably in less than 10 years we'll see no butchers at the major chain stores," he said.

Those in attendance learned how to estimate carcass weights, quality grades, and yield grades using live animals.

Using standard cuts of meat for grading, the group also learned to estimate loin eye area, 10th rib backfat thickness, and percent lean for swine. For beef, they estimated rib eye backfat thickness; rib eye area; and kidney, pelvic, and heart fat to estimate yield grade.

For more information on evaluating meat animals and meat quality, contact your local extension office.

Lamb information is also available.

Clyde Myers urges meat producers and direct-marketers to know their product.