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A 4,300-head closed feedlot located at Hysham, Mont., allows the Bormans to background their black baldie calves for 45 to 60 days before delivering them to buyers.

Healthier and Heavier with Hereford in the Mix

An F1 Hereford-Angus cross helps the Montana Circle B Ranch keep business booming.

by *Martha Ostendorf Mintz*

Despite the freezing December weather, it's smiles all around as Fred and Donna Borman load out another 1,000 head of black baldie calves from their Hysham, Mont., feedlot.

Weaned for at least 45 days, the calves are big, happy and calm as they stroll across the scale, putting up one big fat number after another. The Bormans credit another successful year, in large part, to the advantages of their F1 Hereford-Angus cross.

"Since we started using Hereford bulls, we have bigger, longer, stouter calves that weigh more and are healthier," Fred says. "They gain well, they don't get sick and they finish great. The guys that finish them just love them."

The proof is in their repeat customers. Though the Bormans sell the calves on Superior Livestock Auction, their calves often end up going to the same buyers year after year. Taking delivery of the day's shipment of steers was Rock Valley, Iowa, order buyer Earl DeBey. DeBey purchased 900 heifer calves from the Bormans' Circle B Ranch in 2009.

"We like black baldie calves, and these performed really well," DeBey says. "We tried to buy (the heifers) back this year, but they went for breeding, so we couldn't compete."

The heifers were turned out on cornstalks in Wisner, Neb., until Feb. 28 then put on a solid 2.76 lb. per day throughout feeding, DeBey reports.

"The cattle were extremely healthy," DeBey says.

Healthier calves in the feedlot are likely a direct result of the changes the Bormans have made in their breeding operation, says Scott Anderson, Prewitt and Co. livestock marketer and one of the Bormans' many advisors.

"I've been marketing the Bormans' cattle for seven years, and when they brought in the Hereford bulls, you saw more frame, more size and a better disposition," he says. "I think the improved health comes somewhat from that calm disposition. High-strung cattle will experience more stress and have more health issues."

Rodney Vance, the Bormans' feedlot manager, reports that on

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Scott Anderson, Prewitt and Co. marketing specialist, is one of many experts the Bormans use to help them be a profitable and thriving cattle operation. He advises on everything from health to cattle groupings and helps connect them with the right buyers for their value-added product.



Fred and Donna Borman came to Montana 12 years ago looking for a new challenge; they found it in cattle production.



Feedlot manager Rodney Vance punches a scale ticket as another group of all-natural, hormone-free black baldie calves head across the scale and to the waiting trucks. The feed-efficient F1 crosses gain about 3 lb. per day in the feedlot, packing on 130 lb. or more in their 45- to 60-day stay.



An F1 Hereford-Angus cross has produced good-growing, healthy calves that, along with value-added programs, help the Bormans achieve top dollar on sale day.

3,700 calves the pull rate is about 5% with only 1% of all pulls needing retreatment. Death loss is less than 0.1%.

Statistics are good in the pasture, too. With good, low birth weight bulls, cow boss Jay Shaw says that of the 1,100 head he calves at the ranch south of Miles City, Mont., he has to pull only four or five calves, usually due to feet being turned back.

“The cows calve in the hills, and they’re pretty much on their own, so it’s important to have a calf that jumps up and goes right away,” Shaw says. “We shoot for around 80 lb. at birth.”

Between the hybrid vigor of their cross and healthier calves in the pasture and in the feedlot Fred has seen a significant difference.

“The cross has given us about 50 lb. more per calf,” Fred says. “And I think they feed more efficiently than the straight Angus calves.”

Spread over the 4,000-cow operation, that efficiency means a significant bump in profit potential. Going to the F1

Hereford cross is one of many management decisions the Bormans have made to boost profits for themselves and their buyers in the last 10 years – which is how long they’ve been in the cattle business.

A new challenge

Fred, Donna and Fred’s parents, Frank and Susan Borman, came to Montana in 1998, looking for a new challenge. The younger Bormans ran a successful line of car dealerships in North Carolina, and Frank had reached many peaks in the aviation world – serving in the Air Force, manning space flights on Gemini 7 and Apollo 8 as a NASA astronaut, and serving as CEO of Eastern Airlines for 10 years.

“When we first came to Montana, we purchased a piece of land and were farming part of it,” Frank recalls. “We were told we had better start raising cattle if we wanted the land investment to pay for itself.”

So they did. Donna bought a book titled “Storey’s Guide To Raise Beef Cattle,” and they purchased 125 head of Angus cows to run the rough pastures around the scenic Big Horn river near Big Horn, Mont. They quickly found their best source of knowledge wasn’t in a book but in the generations of beef-producing families surrounding them. The Bormans started putting together a team of people to help them build and manage a profitable operation.



Susan and Frank Borman.

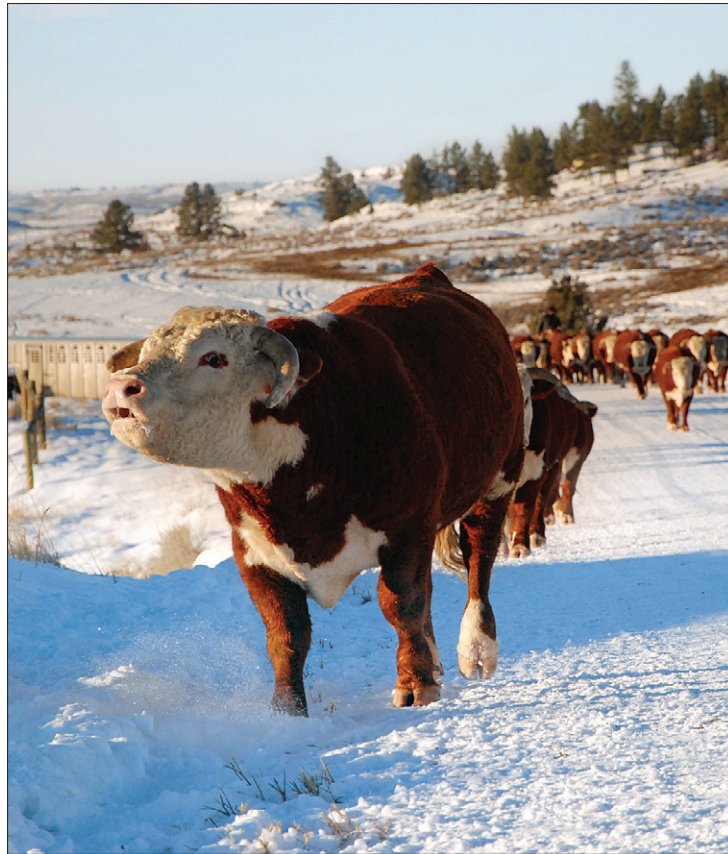
Today, the Bormans have built their operation to 4,000 head that run on two ranches spanning about 160,000 acres of deeded and leased land. They also have a 4,300-head feedlot for weaning calves and wintering bulls and select cows. They raise all their own feed for the feedlot on their farm ground and may one day open it to feeding other livestock. Their team of ranch managers, marketing specialists, feedlot managers and crew has a combined 200 years of ranching experience from which the Bormans draw regularly.

“I don’t hesitate to get input from our crew, and they’ve been a large part of our success,” Fred says. “We’ve got a bunch of really sharp, really good guys that I rely on.”

It was through their help that the Bormans came to consider



The Circle B Crew pictured (l to r) are: Jeston Cundall, Fred Borman, Donna Borman, Andrew Johnson, Seth Flack, Scott Anderson, Smiley Mantei, Rodney Vance, Jay Shaw, Clark Pinkerton, Brent Morrison.



Cow boss Jay Shaw helps move the Bormans' 225 Hereford bulls in from the hills for the winter. Bulls are selected for the ranch by their trusted seedstock source Marvin Feddes and Sons.

crossbreeding. Donna, for one, thought it was a great idea.

"One of the first things my book talked about was the benefits of crossbreeding," Donna says. "It made sense when I was reading the book, and it made sense when we decided to do it on our operation."

The Bormans had always purchased 3-year-old replacements, so it wasn't difficult to make the transition to an F1 cross program. They started shopping around for a good cross. They tried Gelbvieh and then bought a pair of Hereford bulls from the proven pens of Marvin Feddes and Sons in Manhattan, Mont. Herefords won out.

"We looked at other breeds, but we just like the Hereford bulls better," Fred recalls. "They're easier to be around, easier to handle and they made a dramatic difference in the calves."

The Bormans picked the Feddeses after researching the best herds in the area.

"They've got really good birth weights, their EPDs are awesome and they've been around forever," Fred says. "They've won the show in Denver and were the supreme champion pen at the NILE (Northern International Livestock Exposition). They're a proven commodity."

A trusted resource

True to their method of raising cattle, Fred and his team lean heavily on the experienced breeders to secure the best bulls.

"The first time they came to us they had us pick out two bulls for them to try, and they must have liked them because they came back for 25 more," says Dan Feddes.

Now the Feddeses pick out about 50 bulls per year to keep the Bormans' 225-head bull battery fully stocked.

"I've been marketing the Bormans' cattle for seven years, and when they brought in the Hereford bulls, you saw more frame, more size and a better disposition."

— *Scott Anderson*

"It's very unusual for a customer to let us pick the bulls, but it's actually very smart because we really know our bulls best. We know their genetics and what they can do," Feddes says. "There's a tremendous amount of trust involved, and we take it as a huge compliment."

About half of the Feddeses' bulls now go to the Circle B, so they're sure to pick bulls that will help push the Bormans' operation to even greater levels, keeping a close eye on their needs.

"Our herd has always been known for cows that milk," Feddes says. "At first, the Bormans weren't keeping replacement heifers, but now they're selling replacements, so they'll be able to take advantage of that."

The Feddeses also are paying close attention to the new carcass EPDs, sending bulls to the Circle B that score well for ribeye and marbling, traits they hope help earn the Bormans repeat customers.

"We watch the calves sell every year, and they pretty much top the market," Feddes says. "They're definitely doing things right."

Helping the Bormans top the market are the value-added

programs the Circle B follows. The calves are marketed as all-natural, age- and source-verified, Non-Hormone Treated Cattle (NHTC) coming from a private, closed feedlot.

"We want the whole process to be more profitable for us and our buyers," Donna says. "Being all-natural and hormone-free helps us achieve that."

Healthy, thriving Hereford calves fit right into that philosophy. Calves that get sick in the feedlot have to be treated and are then pulled from the natural program, costing premiums. With Hereford-cross calves, pulls are held down and profit potential remains high. But Donna provided possibly the best reason of all to go with a Hereford cross.

"The black baldie calves are just so much cuter," she jokes. **HW**

Value-added programs

From the beginning the Bormans have managed the Circle B Ranch as an all-natural, hormone-free operation.

"We think the market is going that way and that there is a lot of consumer awareness and desire to stay away from cattle that have been treated with hormones to get bigger, faster," Fred Borman says. "We think these programs pay for themselves, and we make more money with them."

The Circle B's feeder calves were the first in Montana to be Non-Hormone Treated Cattle (NHTC) approved and one of the first to be verified all-natural by IMI Global. They are age- and source-verified as well.

"Our verified natural beef has been shown through third-party verification to bring a \$100 or more per-head advantage for our buyers," Fred says.

"The advantages of these cattle start with the breeding and then goes to the programs they're on," says Scott Anderson, Prewitt and Co. livestock marketing specialist. "Buyers are willing to pay more for these cattle because they know what they have behind them."

Calves are weaned and brought to the closed feedlot over two weeks, starting mid-September. Upon arrival they're sorted for sex and given an eID tag for IMI source- and age-verification. Any horns missed at branding are tipped, and the calves are vaccinated and dewormed. In accordance with the Vac-45 plan that the Bormans follow, the calves are then backgrounded at the Bormans' yard for a minimum of 45 days.

When the calves arrive at the feedlot, they weigh about 500 lb. and gain about 3 lb. per day. They're started on a weaning pellet for 28 days and then are moved to a grower pellet, silage and hay.

"The goal is to put weight on them without the calves getting too fleshy," says Rodney Vance, the Circle B feedlot manager.

Once all the calves are on a grower ration, they're sorted by color and size to fit contracts. Calves leave the feedlot at about 680 lb. at a cost of gain of \$0.69 per lb.

"We like backgrounding calves, and we really think it works, especially because we grow most of our own feed," Fred says. They purchased and rebuilt the 4,300-head feedlot in Hysham, Mont., three years ago, making backgrounding more cost effective. "The buyers really like the calves on the Vac-45 program because when they get them, they're weaned, healthy and they go straight to eating without any problems."

And the Bormans' various value-added programs give buyers the flexibility to profit, too. The 1,000 head of steers Iowa order buyer Earl DeBey picked up from the Bormans this year will be fed and sold to Creekstone Farms, Arkansas City, Kan., which markets antibiotic and hormone-free beef, at a premium. **HW**

