

Herd health vital

Rancher likes to grow cotton



BRED HEIFERS: These first-calf heifers were bred to Angus bulls with light birth-weight genetics for easy calving. John Bill Oman prefers predominately black cattle, such as the black baldys.

By J.T. SMITH

THE great thing about John Bill Oman, DVM, is his blunt honesty. The rancher, farmer and veterinarian consultant will tell you exactly what he thinks.

That's especially true about herd health in both stocker cattle and cow-calf operations from his many years of ranching and veterinary work.

"My approach is prevent it — not treat it," Oman says. "I think 'treating' is a very poor tool."

He should know.

The Avoca, Texas, rancher raises multitudes of cows, calves and yearlings. They usually number about 1,000 cows, and he also runs 3,000 to 5,000 yearling cattle annually, depending on the condition of a particular ranch and the year.

In addition to ranches from Central Texas to the Rolling Plains and extreme West Texas, Oman also summers cattle in New Mexico. That and his considerable crop farming of wheat and cotton isn't enough to keep him occupied, so Oman also consults for another three to four ranches in their cow-herd health programs.

Yearling health program

Oman processes all yearling cattle immediately upon arrival — no matter where they originated.

"I buy both country cattle and

Key Points

- All Oman yearling cattle are processed upon arrival.
- John Bill Oman prefers disease prevention to treatment.
- Cows and calves have a meticulous health program.

sale barn cattle, too — mostly from Colorado, Florida, South Texas, as well as this local [Rolling Plains] region," he notes. "And this area is some of the best country for stocker cattle anywhere."

All cattle are handled the same — except sale barn cattle.

"Most sale barn cattle we mass-treat with antibiotics upon arrival," Oman notes. "With country cattle, we don't do the mass antibiotics."

But both the country cattle and the sale barn cattle get a modified live vaccine for bovine rhinotracheitis, bovine viral diarrhea and bovine respiratory syncytial viruses, along with a clostridial product. Yearling cattle also get a pour-on insecticide, and are implanted, branded, earmarked and ear-tagged. Any bull calves are castrated.

No matter which ranch operation may be the eventual destination for the cattle, all the yearlings are brought directly to the Oman home place in Jones County for that processing.

Oman has steady help from his wife, Belinda, who is a seasoned handler

of cattle; one full-time man who has worked for him 23 years; and two to four part-time employees in the fall.

The satellite ranches all have at least one employee.

Oman uses a helicopter not only as a time-saver when locating cattle on scattered ranch operations, but also in working to control brush. Sirens and cake wagons also help gather cattle.

"We do it the easiest way possible," he quips. "But it's not always easy."

Oman's exact in the cattle he wants. "I don't want any yearling calves weighing under 400 pounds, and I buy them up to 550 pounds," he allows. "That's my preference. I don't like itty-bitty cattle."

He buys mixed-breed cattle, but he keeps ear (Brahman influence) to a minimum. "Because a lot of my cattle go to the Midwest, like Nebraska or Minnesota, and they don't want it," he adds.

Oman says he's seeing the same trend in the Texas Panhandle now, where some of his cattle go.

"I prefer [yearling] steers, but we handle heifers, too," he notes.

Cow-herd management

Oman's herd health program for his cow-calf operation is a whole other ball game. He prefers predominately black cows with Angus influence. He uses several Maine-Anjou bulls and Angus bulls. (The Maine-Anjou bulls are mostly for producing show calves.)

The mostly black baldy cows calve twice per year in spring and fall.

Spring calves stay at the Oman ranch and go on wheat pasture in the fall. Fall calves are weaned the next June, and all of them go to Midwest states.

All of the home-born calves, fall or spring, still get the same health processing as the calves that Oman buys.

The cows and calves are vaccinated with the same protections as in the yearling health program. In addition, all cows are vaccinated for trichomoniasis, a disease that can cause abortions and sterility in cattle.

"I strongly recommend trichomoniasis vaccinations for cows of all my clients," Oman emphasizes. "I've seen what trich can do."

For Oman, it's part of running a tight ship.

FOR a guy that acknowledges "we're pretty scattered" regarding far-flung cattle operations in Texas and New Mexico, John Bill Oman, DVM, marches to a different drummer.

That is to say the closest familiarity most ranchers, or "cattlemen," much less veterinarians, have with "cotton" is their blue jeans.

Oh, the tall, lanky Texan wears the big white hat and boots, but he also loves raising cotton in Jones County, Texas. What's more, he likes to see how others do it in different parts of the Cotton Belt.

Last year, he carved time from his hectic schedule to make the National Cotton Council's Producer Information Exchange Tour. He traveled to Mississippi Delta cotton fields.

"Now those guys really raise cotton!" he marvels. "The PIE tour was one of the most fun things I've ever done. I'd recommend it to anyone."

Bayer CropScience sponsored the PIE tour.

Oman and his wife, Belinda, also attended the 2007 Beltwide Cotton Conferences in New Orleans.

This year, Oman has had so much rain on his own cotton land, he probably feels like he's living in another part of the Cotton Belt.

But with some heavy clay soils to deal with, he still makes use of pre-plant incorporated, yellow herbicide for weed control.

He also grows some Roundup Ready-trait cotton to let him tackle weeds soon after cotton emergence.

Whatever the traits, his cotton is all FiberMax varieties. All his FiberMax has the Bollgard trait with *Bacillus thuringiensis* genetics to control worms.

The Boll Weevil Eradication Program already has the weevil under control in his area.

"That's a good thing this [wet] year," Oman assures. "The weevils would have carried us off."

Wheat grower, too

Besides his 500 acres of cotton, Oman also grows about 2,000 acres of wheat.

He aims to get a lot of forage for fall and winter grazing from the wheat for the multitudes of stocker cattle the Oman Ranch raises, so he sows wheat very early.

"We start planting our wheat here the last week of August," he says.

He credits Dub Vinson, president of Abilene Ag Service & Supply Inc., for helping him in wheat — whether that's fertility guidelines or weed and insect control.

"Dub's real good," Oman notes.

Oman expects a lot of forage and doesn't skimp on the fertilizer.

"We put down 200 to 250 pounds of fertilizer per acre — whether it's dry or wet at the time — as preplant," he notes.

"Dub is my fertilizer man; he knows both wheat and cattle," Oman assures.

Oman grows Abilene Ag Experimental variety wheat, along with some Jagalene variety (a Jagger and Abilene cross) from AgriPro.

"It works for me," Oman concludes.



PLOWING GROUND: After many months of unusually heavy and extremely frequent rainfall at the Oman Ranch at Avoca, Texas, over the first half of 2007, farmhand Ricky Garcia finally got to plow some wheat stubble. The Oman Ranch raises about 2,000 acres of wheat and 500 acres of cotton.