

LivestockLinks

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Pork Farm Integration

Tinsley Gregg, Regional Extension Agent

As soon as folks get out of their cars at the Gibson farm, they are greeted by the rich aroma of hickory smoke and perhaps a faint whiff of sage. That's because, in addition to barbecue, the Gibsons are famous for their fresh pork sausage. Howard Gibson says the family's custom meat business began more than 30 years.

Today, the sausage and barbecue business is how the farm markets its hogs. Howard's son, John plants about 400 acres of wheat, corn and soybeans. The corn and some of the wheat are used as feed in the Gibsons' 300-head, farrow-to-finish hog operation. The hogs, in turn, sustain the meat business. Economists sometimes refer to this strategy as direct marketing or value-added. At a time when low prices have forced many pork producers out of business, the Gibsons have been able to adapt by providing consumers a farm-fresh alternative to supermarket meats.

"We would have been out of business years ago if it hadn't been for this place right here," says Howard. "We would have been out of the row cropping and the hog business." They actually started raising hogs in 1964. Over the years, the Gibsons raised purebred Durocs and ran a finishing operation before getting back into the sow business in 1992. By then, however, most of the hog buying stations in the area had closed their doors due to consolidation of the meat packing industry.

"We would have been out of business years ago if it hadn't been for this place right here."

Howard Gibson

Without the meat store, the younger Gibson admits he probably couldn't raise hogs because the nearest place to sell them is in Tennessee. In contrast, the Gibsons don't have to drive anywhere to sell their sausage and barbecue. Their customers come to them — purchasing what amounts to about six hogs a week at the on-farm store. They sell about 500 pounds of sausage a week as well as smaller quantities of sugar-cured bacon, fresh pork chops, tenderloin and country-cured ham. The Gibsons are earning a reputation among barbecue connoisseurs.

The flavor comes from hickory smoke, which is drawn across the meat from a fire box at one end of the pit and from a dry rub made of salt, brown sugar, cayenne pepper and black pepper. But Howard is quick to point out that all the seasoning in the world won't make good barbecue if you don't start with good meat. Whether it's the hogs or Howard's skill as a butcher, customers seem to agree that Gibson's farm fresh sausage tastes better. Using mostly word-of-mouth advertising, Howard and John have grown their business to the point that it now draws customers from hundreds of miles away.

The Gibson's hot and mild sausages are made using a commercial blend of spices, and each batch is ground three times to get just the right consistency. Howard lets the customers know that it may be a little leaner than what they are used to buying in the grocery store. "We get more complaints about our sausage being too lean than too fat," he says. One thing customers don't complain about, though, is how fresh it tastes. Because they make sausage every Wednesday, it is seldom more than three days old when bought. For those who prefer to freeze their purchases, the Gibsons have a fully equipped, health-inspected meat packing facility that includes a stuffing machine that's used to make neat, 2-pound packages of sausage as well as a vacuum packer for barbecue, bacon and ham.

The store at the Gibsons' farm is open Wednesday through Saturday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Other family members help keep the store open during the week and sometimes help out on Saturdays. Meanwhile, John is responsible for the row crops and hogs, which he manages with the help of one part-time employee.

Producing their own hogs, grain, doing their own processing, and retailing right on the farm has allowed the Gibsons' farm to be integrated.

John says, "We've really grown into this business over the years, and it has allowed us to continue farming." For more information or directions, call John or Howard Gibson at (256) 753-6618.

Developing a Homegrown — and Home Finished — Commercial Beef Sector

Jim Langcuster, News and Public Affairs Specialist

Alabama may lack the traditional feedlots and finishing systems common in the Midwest, but there is one thing it possesses in abundance: forages.

A Kansan who grew up on a traditional Midwestern livestock farm and who now works as an Auburn University animal scientist wanted to capitalize on this fact.

Since his arrival on the Plains some 10 years ago, Dr. Christopher Kerth, an Auburn associate professor of animal science, has focused on developing a forage-based alternative to traditional livestock production - a grass-fed approach that would provide both an added market niche to producers and, most important of all, another source of profitability.

Under the current approach, calves are produced in Alabama and then shipped north for feeding, finishing and slaughter. Kerth wanted to develop a system by which the calves could be kept in the South and grown on Alabama forages instead.

“The primary idea is to cut out the middle man, the finishing operation, and capture some of that profit on behalf of Alabama growers,” Kerth says.

That not only means cutting out the middle man but also reducing fuel costs.

Kerth enlisted the help of Dr. Walter Prevatt, an Alabama Cooperative Extension livestock economist. Like any good economist, Prevatt began crunching the numbers and has also laid much of the groundwork for this approach.

For a time, it was an uphill slog.

“Before there were spikes in fuel and grain prices, there was not much of an economic case for doing this,” Kerth recalls.

Things began to change as the costs of fuel and ultimately grain began to rise a few years ago.

“Transporting that animal out to the feedlot has gotten very expensive,” Prevatt says. “In the past you were looking at about \$2 a road mile on an 1,100-mile haul; now you’re looking at between \$3.25 and \$3.35 a road mile - roughly a 50 percent increase.”

Feed costs, prices closely tied with fuel price fluctuations, also have risen markedly. A few years ago, corn ran about \$2 a bushel. Now those prices are running between \$3 and \$5 a bushel, Prevatt observes, adding that this has changed the whole economic picture.

Consequently, the whole idea of raising grass-fed beef seems more economically plausible.

For producers, the biggest challenge involves management - preparing and managing perennial forage grasses to assure that the animals post the most optimal weight gain. This calls for close management to enhance fertility as well as to control insects and disease threats.

“You’re managing grass, so, compared with the traditional feedlot approach, things become much more contingent on weather and traditional feeding systems.”

Because it’s so weather-related, growers must also contend with boom and bust periods in terms of weight gain - another significant departure from the traditional feedlot approach.

In fact, that is one of the challenges that most concerns Prevatt.

“The quality of grass is not adequate year round and won’t be unless you go to a great deal of expense,” he says.

“From about November to May, we have really good quality forages that can put weight on these cattle, but from June to October it is a problem.”

There are some high-protein sources that can be grown this time of year, but these tend to be expensive, he says.

Even if they manage to get their livestock over this June to October hurdle, they face an especially acute challenge during between October and November.

“You face that void between October and November where you really have to find a high-quality forage-grass that will help them gain.

Prevatt characterizes this as a “hole in the production system that’s yet to be solved.”

And it’s something that any prospective grass-fed producer should understand, Kerth says.

“Management is much more difficult than what is associated with traditional feedlot systems.”

Grass-fed producers also face the added challenge of attracting customers to this new product, which, until now, has not been typical American fare.

“Fat is where we get the flavor in beef,” Kerth says. “So when the fatty acids in beef are changed, the taste changes a little too.”

Americans are used to the fatty acid profile of grain-fed beef, and grass-fed alternatives will take some time gaining traction market, he predicts.

“It’s not better or worse, it’s just different.”

For now, Prevatt says the emerging grass-fed sector one big challenge: developing an infrastructure, namely getting the small number of meat-packing plants geared up to process this meat and to develop a marketing structure to support this endeavor.

In the meantime, while conceding that grass-fed beef production will never supplant more conventional forms of production, Kerth and Prevatt are confident that this emerging industry will become a respectable integral part of the state’s livestock sector.

Feeding Cattle for Freezer Beef

Darrell Rankins Jr., Extension Animal Scientist

In the last few years there has been a groundswell of interest in raising freezer beef for home consumption and selling a couple of steers to friends and neighbors. Many folks have questions regarding the best way to feed the cattle to ensure that the beef will be good. It is simple to achieve this goal. Simply grow the calf to about 750 to 800 pounds using whatever forage/feed combination works best for your situation. Once the calf has reached this weight begin to introduce him to corn starting with about 5 pounds per day. Over the next few days, gradually increase the daily amount of corn to 2 percent of the body weight.

An 800-pound calf will get to about 16 pounds of corn per day. It is important to maintain a routine feeding schedule, once or twice per day at about the same time each day. During this time of getting the calf from 800 pounds to slaughter, the main need is for energy and enough roughage to keep his rumen normal. The corn provides the energy and feeding about 8 pounds of hay per day will keep the rumen functioning properly. Cattle with good genetics will usually gain 3 to 3.25 pounds per day under this system and will be ready for slaughter in about 100 days depending on their mature body size. It is also important to keep free-choice salt available during the feeding period.

Many people ask about using soyhulls or corn gluten feed to fatten the calf. These feeds will certainly work but the calf will likely gain a little slower and may have slightly less marbling at slaughter weight. If I were using either of these feeds, I would do it in combination with corn. For example, half corn and half corn gluten feed.

In addition to feeding the animal so that it gains sufficiently to deposit body fat, it is also important for you to visit with the meat processor about the processing of the animal. To ensure tenderness, some aging of the carcass needs to take place. Your custom processor can guide you in making these decisions.

Considerations for the Calving Season

Soren Rodning, Extension Veterinarian

Successful calving seasons are the result of good planning and hard work. Observation of cows and heifers before and during the calving season is necessary to ensure the health and safety of cows, heifers and calves. Cows should be checked at least daily during the calving season, and heifers should be checked more frequently, perhaps several times a day. Having the cows and heifers in an easily accessible pasture will make this task more manageable. Also, allowing animals to calve in clean pastures is better for the health of the calf and the cow or heifer.

One of the complications encountered during the calving season is dystocia (a difficult delivery), and sometimes calving assistance is required. Therefore, cattle producers should be familiar with the signs of impending parturition (calving) as well as the sequence of events associated with normal labor and delivery to determine when assistance is necessary.

Signs of impending parturition include the following:

- The udder and vulva will often enlarge 1 to 3 weeks before parturition.
- Cows and heifers often become more nervous (restless) and, if possible, may isolate themselves from the rest of the herd just before parturition.
- Cows and heifers may show signs of abdominal discomfort by kicking at their belly; they may also glance to the rear nervously.
- The tail-head appears raised as ligaments around the rump of the cow or heifer relax.

Normal parturition is divided into three sequential stages:

Stage I – Preparatory

- The duration for cows is 4 to 8 hours; for heifers, 6 to 12 hours
- The cow or heifer may become nervous and isolate herself from the rest of the herd.
- Uterine contractions begin.
- Colostrum/milk drops into the teats.
- The water bag appears towards the end of this stage. Stage II begins when the water bag breaks.

Stage II – Delivery of the calf

- The duration for cows is less than 1 hour; for heifers, 1 to 4 hours.
- The cow or heifer is now actively straining.
- In normal parturition, the calf's fore legs and head protrude first about 70 percent of the time, and the hind legs and tail come first about 30 percent of the time.
- The calf is delivered.

Stage III – Expulsion of the placenta (afterbirth)

- The duration for cows and heifers is 1 to 12 hours. It usually occurs within the first few hours.
- Cow or heifer straining decreases.
- Uterine contractions continue and the placenta is expelled.
- If the placenta is not expelled soon after birth, do not manually remove the placenta by pulling it out. Contact your veterinarian for advice.

Assistance may be necessary when parturition does not proceed as described, and early intervention is the key to a successful outcome. Waiting too long to provide assistance unnecessarily risks the life of the cow or heifer and her calf. Seek the help of a veterinarian or experienced cattle producer when needed.

Supplies used to assist with calf delivery:

- Obstetrical (OB) chains or ropes. Chains are preferred because they can be easily disinfected after use. OB chains and ropes are used for pulling on the legs. See Figure 1 for proper placement of OB chains. Never attach OB chains or ropes to a calf's jaw and pull because the jaw will almost always fracture.
- OB handles for pulling on the chains or ropes
- Mechanical calf puller (calf-jack). Use with caution and do not apply excessive force. A calf-jack can exert substantial force on the cow or heifer and the calf. When used improperly, the cow, heifer, and/or the calf can be injured or killed.
- OB lubricants
- Plastic gloves
- Buckets
- Towels and paper towels
- Iodine for disinfecting the calf's navel
- Never attempt to deliver a calf by pulling with any type of vehicle.

Some things to keep in mind while trying to decide when to provide assistance or when to call your veterinarian:

- Calving takes time, and it often takes longer for heifers than cows so be patient. However, progress should be steady and generally fit within the time frames previously mentioned. Once Stage II begins (delivery of the calf), the cow or heifer should make visible progress about every 15 to 20 minutes.
- Use the 2+1 rule to help determine when to call for help. Upon examination, 2 feet and 1 head (or 2 feet and 1 tail) should be felt or seen for a normal delivery to proceed. If adequate time has elapsed and 2+1 is still not seen or felt, then assistance is needed.
- If the cow or heifer becomes exhausted and quits trying to calve, then assistance is necessary.
- When in doubt, call your veterinarian. The outcome is always more favorable if assistance is provided sooner than later.
- No more than two strong people should pull on a calf at the same time.

If possible and if safe for you and the animal, capture the cow or heifer needing assistance before your veterinarian arrives. This will make his or her job easier, and minimize your expenses.

Calendar of Events

January	15 to 16	Alabama 4-H and FFA Market Hog Show, Montgomery
	23 to 24	Alabama Horse Fair, Garret Coliseum, Montgomery
February	26	Youth EPD Bull Sale, Montgomery
	26 to 27	Tri-States Beef Cattle Expo, Dothan
	26 to 27	North Alabama Junior Beef Expo, Cullman
March	5 to 6	Tennessee Valley Junior Beef Expo, Huntsville
	10 to 11	West Central Alabama Junior Beef Expo, Montgomery
	11 to 14	Alabama Junior Livestock Expo, Montgomery
	20	4-H and FFA Dairy Judging Contests, Shorter
April	20	4-H Dairy Quiz/Scholars Bowl, Shorter
	10	Beef U Educational Program, Auburn University

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