

TEEMING WITH TECHNOLOGY

RFID, EID AND SOCIAL MEDIA HELP KEEP AN ALABAMA FARM EFFICIENT AND CONNECTED TO ITS CUSTOMERS.

Alabama cattleman Rodney Walker speaks softly and carries a big stick, at least when he's working cattle. But not just any stick — rather, a black electronic wand.

Standing at an electronic keypad situated next to a cattle chute, he explains in his gentle Southern drawl how his northeastern Alabama cattle operation benefits from modern technology in the barn.

As a large bull lumbers his way through the pens, Rodney catches the animal in the head gate and brings the wand to the bull's head, revealing that this is no ordinary "stick." Instead, it's equipped with radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology to help him keep up-to-date herd records.

To Rodney and his family — wife Crystal and son Jason — who own and operate Walker Lands & Cattle near Lineville, Ala., the technology simply provides them with another way to produce healthy cattle that will yield nutritious, safe beef for consumers.

"Anything we can do to raise better beef on our farm, that's what we're going to do," Rodney says.

That mentality, combined with a commitment to be good stewards of the land they love, is what drives the couple.

"Agriculture is really where both of our hearts are at," Crystal says.

EFFECTIVE RECORD-KEEPING

Rodney received his first ag loan to purchase a hay baler at the age of 15, and admits that farming got in his blood at an early age. He maintained a herd of cattle for a number of years, but after the decline of the commercial construction industry in the mid-2000s, which impacted a business he owned, he became fully committed to raising cattle.

However, with herd expansion came a new issue: how to most effectively record the information generated by and needed



for the larger herd. His solution was to use CattleMax software, a record-keeping system designed specifically for cattle operations.

"I've seen a lot of ways to ID cattle, and I've seen a lot of people around here tagging the calf and writing its birthdate with a marker with the momma cow's number and coming home to write that number on the back of the pantry door or notebook," Rodney says, painting the scenario that he wanted to avoid. "I'm not a computer geek, but I do like technology and information. I don't like having to write the same thing down two or three times. This is an easy system for us."

In the early days, the CattleMax software was strictly a computer-based program, but today the Walkers can access the information from their smartphones and tablets. In recent years, Rodney has upgraded their record-keeping system even further, converting strictly to an electronic identification (EID) ear tag system. A small button-like EID tag is placed through each animal's ear. The tag has a unique 15-digit number printed on it, linking it to that

particular animal. When working cattle in the barn, Rodney can scan the tag with an RFID wand, identifying that animal and linking new data with past information in the system.

With several hundred Angus and F-1 Brangus cows and approximately 25 bulls on the farm, Rodney says that using the EID/RFID system saves him time and allows him to easily transport cattle across state lines. Also, because the tag is with that animal for life, it gives him helpful carcass data after the animal is harvested for beef.

The tags also have the Walker name on them, a feature that Rodney admittedly loves. "I'm proud of our cattle," he says.

CONNECTING WITH CONSUMERS

Besides giving the Walkers the information they need, the EID system gives consumers what they want — to know where their food comes from. From the gate to the plate, their beef is source-verified and the farm is listed as a featured producer on the Where Food Comes From website.

The Walkers are also certified through the Beef Quality Assurance program, which provides guidelines for beef cattle production. Funded by The Beef Checkoff, the national program works to raise consumer confidence by offering proper management techniques and encouraging a commitment to quality within every segment of the beef industry.

Rodney and Crystal both look forward to the not-so-distant future when a consumer will be able to scan a package of beef in the grocery store and see where it comes from, all the way back to Walker Cattle.

"We want to do all that we can to encourage consumers to be comfortable going to the grocery store and purchasing beef and cooking it at home," Crystal says.

She extends the couple's desire to connect with consumers through her activity on social media and her involvement with the American National CattleWomen (ANCW).

Crystal uses Walker Lands & Cattle's Facebook page to share her country living experiences and to promote agriculture, educate consumers and provide an overall awareness of an industry she loves.

An active ANCW member, she recently was elected to serve on the organization's board of directors. She previously helped revitalize her county's chapter and chaired the national bylaws, policies and procedures committee.

"I feel very blessed to live where I do and be involved in agriculture," she says. "I just like to take and post pictures of cattle in

the pasture. People in the inner cities see it and learn what an Angus is."

DIVERSIFYING AND FILLING A LOCAL NEED

Rodney and Crystal say they rely on a good lender to make their operation work. As customers of Alabama Farm Credit, the couple has worked with Jim Tollison Jr., branch manager in the lending co-op's Talladega office, to make several land purchases throughout the years. Jason is also an Alabama Farm Credit customer.

"The Walkers are great people to work with and very smart business people," says Tollison. "The ID system is a lender's dream when trying to get data on an operation and access how they're doing."

Alabama Farm Credit also finances Walker Lands & Cattle's Alabama Gooseneck Sales, a business Rodney started in 2013 when he was looking for a way to diversify and expand his operation after Jason graduated from college. As one of the leading Gooseneck dealers in the southeastern United States with a brand that is better recognized in the company's home state of Texas, Rodney started the endeavor with an unusual agreement that the manufacturer would be happy if he sold 4 to 5 trailers a year.



Now, with an average of 25 trailers on his lot at any given time, Rodney sells most of his stock before it is delivered from Texas, and is on track to sell 50 trailers this year. With the help of Alabama Farm Credit, he recently opened a second location in Florence.

"This is the first credit line of this type that we have made a loan on," Tollison says of financing Alabama Gooseneck Sales. "We've had to develop a way of tracking and working with Rodney to insure that we are properly servicing his loan. We appreciate the opportunity to be a part of this new aspect of their operations." ■ SH

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