

Young beef producers target college experience

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Young cattle producers planning to build beef herds continue to seek hands-on educational curriculums such as the 100 Beef Cow Ownership Advantage Program at the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture (NCTA) in Curtis.

“Each year, we have students enrolling at NCTA because they want to become cattle owner-producers, or own their own farms,” reports Dr. Douglas Smith, chairman of NCTA’s Agricultural Production Systems Division.

Smith says the hands-on training, combined with strong agribusiness and beef production classes, have made NCTA’s 100 Cow and 100 Acre programs appealing. Students want to live and work in rural America.

Dr. Smith points to three enterprising graduates as examples. Dayna Cayer of Wauneta (Class of 2013), Luke Schweitzer of Strang (2012), and Zach Gimeson of Phillipsburg, KS (2013) are each aiming for their own private ownership and production operations.

“At NCTA, we believe that if students become familiar with entrepreneurial concepts, they can help their rural communities remain economically viable,” says Scott Mickelsen, NCTA’s associate dean.

Dayna Cayer recently graduated in NCTA’s Livestock Management Systems, and has worked most Fridays the past five years at the Imperial Auction Market. She owns a small herd of breeding heifers and has been able to pasture them with a mentor/partner’s cattle near Wauneta. Her goal: buy land, and eventually own 400 cows (200 spring calving and 200 fall calving).

“Right now, I am working to build up some income to really start getting my own place going,” Cayer said. She wants to raise Hereford-Angus crossbred calves. “I wasn’t really sure how to get started in the industry, so with the 100 Cow program I got my foot in the door. I wouldn’t have considered asking my friend, to buy some heifers and run them with his cows. The program helped me to develop the plan, punch numbers (financially) and decide if it would work.”

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Although she'd been around cattle since the age of three while her family had a dairy operation in Michigan, it wasn't until the move to Nebraska when she yearned to know about the beef cattle side of the industry. Now, her partnership with an established producer has helped reinforce her hands-on training from NCTA. "I help him with putting cattle out to grass, pregnancy checking, and helping when he needs a hand." She relies on her 5-year-old gelding, Blackjack, for much of her sorting and pen work at Imperial Auction Market, and for cattle work at the ranch.

Having an established mentor/partner is also how another 2013 NCTA graduate is able to realize initial success. Actually, Zach Gimeson's program in the 100 Acre Advantage took him back to Kansas for farming and custom work. But, he hopes in two years with the help of his mentor, Michael Kats, to have enough pasture lined up to buy cows and start a beef herd as well.

"Yes, I am now living my dream," Gimeson said, after completing his two-year technical ag program and graduating May 2. He farms his own 240 acres of alfalfa, oats and soon will plant grain sorghum near Phillipsburg. "I love being in the country, farming and owning my operation."

He credits the capstone class in 100-Acre Ownership Advantage for preparing him for the loan application process at the Farm Service Agency office in Norton, Kansas. "What I learned at NCTA certainly helped make it easier."

Gimeson, originally a city kid from Ogallala, has worked for diversified ag operations in Kansas since he was 16 years old. He had earlier college education and work experience in construction management, but kept returning to farming in Kansas where he had some relatives and a great relationship with his mentor. He chose agriculture over a construction career, because he is passionate about ag production, working outdoors, and with the land.

Ownership Advantage

The 100 Cow Ownership Advantage works like this: NCTA students take 76 hours of coursework, much of which is hands-on including calving, health programs, processing and

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branding calves in the spring, and working with animals at NCTA's farm and feedlot. Also, students get a heavy dose of agri-business courses where they outline short-and long-term goals after studying marketing, financial plans, input costs, cash flows, land acquisitions, machinery purchases and more. Field tours and visits directly with cattle producers about their management methods solidify career choices and professional development.

As Smith and animal science professor Teri Jo Bek are diligently guiding students through livestock courses, Dr. Brad Ramsdale heads the 100 Acre Ownership Advantage, emphasizing agronomy and crop production aspects. Certainly, none of the students would succeed, they said, without Paul Clark and the teachers in the Agribusiness Division. Each class builds on another, emphasizing business, entrepreneurship and long-range planning for business ownership.

Upon completion of the two-year program, students are prepared to apply for financing through their own ag lender, or apply for a Beginning Farmer-Rancher low-interest loan of up to \$300,000 through USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). The interest rate is usually below 2 percent, lower than traditional agricultural lending. Students know what paperwork, cash flow projections and business plans to prepare before they approach any lender.

In fact, when Luke Schweitzer of Strang went to his local bank so well organized, he was granted an operating loan for his first year out of college. The May, 2012 graduate now is in partnership with his dad, leasing 60 head of cows from him on a 60-40 split, with Luke providing the labor and sweat equity. His dad, the landlord, provides the cow-calf pairs plus a breeding bull.

"This last year worked out really well," says Schweitzer, "so we are doing it again this year."

When he first started looking at college programs, Schweitzer had narrowed it to three choices and selected NCTA due to the 100 Cow Advantage. Originally, he was thinking he would strike out elsewhere and would need a mentor/landlord partner to help get him started. Then, things at home changed and as the last of five children, Luke was invited to return to farm with his dad.

While at NCTA, he made the most of his college experience. He graduated with academic honors, was also a residence assistant in the dorms, played basketball one year, and worked at

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a tire shop in Curtis and for a rancher south of town.

The summer internship Schweitzer had between his first and second year of studies was invaluable. He worked at a ranch near Whitman, which included a feeding operation north of Mullen. Being on a Sandhills hay crew and operating machinery on wet meadows and pastures was far different than the fields of south central Nebraska, he said. Even building fence in sandy soils was unique.

“I had a great experience there,” he said. “It is a lot different solely on a ranch, than when farming is involved.”

In addition to managing their own herds or farming operations, all three new producers have a second income to help with the cash flow. Schweitzer also works for a nearby neighbor and custom harvester.

Cayer’s NCTA internship was working for a custom farming operation which traveled into Kansas and Oklahoma, and it also ran 1,100 cow-calf pairs so she, too, had varied hands-on experiences.

Producer, Landlord Win-Win

A landlord may be eligible for a tax credit by assisting the young producer. Resources are also available through the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.

And, the satisfaction of working with an industrious beginning producer can be rewarding for the mentor and whole operation, Mickelsen says.

“Although the relationship between the landowner and the new NCTA graduate is beneficial to both parties,” Mickelsen notes, “in the bigger picture, this catalyst program helps young people return to rural America, to not only be future owners of rural businesses, but also provide

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building and sustainability to schools, churches, and existing farms and ranches through rural leadership for generations to come.”

All three students applaud the NCTA Ownership Advantage programs, and encourage landowners to strongly consider serving as employers and potential landlord partners.

“It would be nice to have more willingness for ranchers in the program,” Schweitzer said. “I don’t feel cheated because I have a place and where I will spend my future. But for those students who put in a lot of hard work, don’t have a place back at home, and want to break into the business, it would be great to have more landlords in the partner pool.”

Gimeson echoes that need. “I wish more farmers and ranchers could come to Curtis, take a look at the programs, and talk with these 100-acre (and 100-cow) students. It would help a lot.”

A low-interest loan helped Gimeson to work with FSA to buy more start-up equipment – a tractor, swather and baler. While baling his first cutting of alfalfa in mid-May, he noted that all the hay was sold and there will be strong demand for the second cutting, too.

As an older student at NCTA, the then 30-year-old Gimeson was a residence hall assistant, having dormitory leadership duties. Now, two years later, switching to ownership and management of a farm, he shoulders financial responsibility and risk.

“I couldn’t have done this without encouragement from Michael. He’s like a Dad to me but since he’s only 10 years older, he’s more like a brother,” Gimeson says. He is the one who pointed me toward the 100-Acre opportunity at NCTA, and is the one helping me look at expanding into grass and cattle next.”

It was about 16 years of “sweat equity” by Gimeson on the Kats farm, plus an internship there in the summers during college that helped build confidence and desire for the ownership program.

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Whether individuals are interested students or potential landlords, they are urged to contact Dr. Douglas Smith, (308) 367-5286 or e-mail doug.smith@unl.edu, or Dr. Brad Ramsdale, (308) 367-5225 or e-mail bramsdale2@unl.edu for more information.