Double A Farm

Introduction

Double A Farm is a 369-acre property near Coalmont in Grundy County, Tennessee owned by Steve and Donna Ahearn. Steve and Donna moved from Long Island, New York looking for “a total change in lifestyle” after operating a deli for many years. They purchased the farm in 2009 and also purchased 40 Longhorn cows from the farm’s renter.

Exploring the Value-Added Opportunity

Steve and Donna began marketing their Longhorn calves for use in rodeos. “We sold our Longhorn calves to Missouri for rodeo stock,” said Steve. “But when the bottom fell out of that rodeo market, I took some to the sale barn.” Steve was surprised and disappointed to find his calves sold for a far lower price than other calves at the local sale barn. He discovered that cattle with horns received lower prices and the colored Longhorn hides were also viewed unfavorably by buyers. “So I started looking at the freezer beef thing – because there’s no difference in the hides at that point,” said Steve. “When it’s on the plate, it’s either good or it’s not good.”

Steve recognized that beef with Longhorn genetics might appeal to health-conscious consumers. While final fat content is influenced by the animal’s actual genetic makeup and diet, research from Texas A&M reports
a lower fat content and favorable cholesterol profile from Longhorn beef. Beef producers should be aware, however, that making any health claims about their product on their label or in marketing is regulated by federal agencies.

At first, he had some steers processed for himself, giving the meat to friends for their response. “Sometimes they’d tell me they liked it, but I wasn’t quite satisfied with it,” he said.

**Fine-tuning the Product**

Steve has used customer comments and his own rigorous evaluation to improve his beef. His first “customers,” his friends, told him the beef was not quite as tender as they wanted. He adjusted that by changing his finishing time, formerly two months, to four months. “My animals are grass-fed and grain-finished,” he said. “I don’t mislead anybody. It’s in my brochures – everything I talk about is grass-fed, grain-finished.” He said the grain-finishing results in a beef more to his, and his customers’, taste preferences.

Steve came to realize his Longhorns did not gain as quickly as other breeds, so he started crossing his Longhorns with a Braunvieh bull; those 50/50 heifers are now crossed with a Balancer. He is building his herd toward a goal of 100 cows. “The calves grow faster, and I can get beef ready quicker,” he said. He believes the ¼-Longhorn crosses still appeal to his health-conscious customers. “I still have that influence in there from my Longhorns, which is what I’m looking for. That’s my niche – that’s really what I want,” he said.

**Accessing the Market**

Steve started taking the beef directly to potential customers at the local farmers market at Tracy City in 2011. In 2013, about 40 percent of his sales were at the Tracy City farmers market, with another 10 percent sold from the farm. An online market, SewaneeLocallyGrown.net, brings another 30 to 40 percent. He also started selling at the downtown Murfreesboro farmers market in 2013.

Steve also offers customers the opportunity to buy a quarter, half or whole beef. Customers can pick the meat up at the farm or the processor.

Different markets demand a different pricing structure. “My pricing structure has been and probably always will be lower in Grundy County, simply due to the fact that the average family income is very low,” he said. He uses the local grocery beef price to guide his prices.

His customers, especially those buying at the Murfreesboro farmers market and online...
Sewanee markets, seem more interested in potential health aspects from his Longhorn-cross beef. “There are some that want an all grass-fed [product],” he said, “and I point them to my competitor at the Murfreesboro market.”

Steve does not give the animals used for beef any antibiotics or added hormones. “The customers look for that,” he said.

Steve’s total sales in 2013 equaled about 25 animals. “My personal goal would be 50 animals,” he said. “I got into this because I had Longhorns, what the sale barns considered an inferior product. Now, I’ve learned to raise cattle, and I enjoy what I’m doing. If I can make just a little over the sale barn with the value-added, I’m a happy man.”

**Keys to Success**

Steve, whose experience at his New York deli has helped him with direct marketing, provides several pieces of advice to producers considering marketing beef. Steve’s main advice was, “Don’t underestimate your expenses.” In addition to the time of selling at farmers markets, he said, there is the equipment cost. He spent between $3,000 and $4,000 on his trailer with coolers and approximately $10,000 for a walk-

**By the Numbers**

Steve and Donna Ahearn’s goal for selling beef direct to the customer was to offset the discount their horned calves received at the sale barn. Weaned Longhorn calves could sell for $0.30 to $0.40 less than black calves. “My cost to raise that calf is approximately $300,” Steve said. “When I started, for a 700-lb Longhorn calf, I would get about $0.90 per pound, or $630 at the sale barn. A 700-lb Angus calf would bring about $230 more.”

Steve wanted to realize at least that $230 premium by feeding out the calf and selling it to the consumer. His first analysis looked like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost of raising calf</th>
<th>$300</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value of Longhorn calf at sale barn</td>
<td>$630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference between Longhorns and other calves</td>
<td>$230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feed for finishing</td>
<td>$350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing</td>
<td>$350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum total for beef sold direct</td>
<td>$1,860</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

His goal was to sell that animal for at least $1,900, hopefully realizing a few hundred dollars more to cover labor, transportation and other marketing costs.

“My animals are grass-fed and grain-finished,” he said. “I don’t mislead anybody.”
in freezer at his farm. Processing and transportation expenses are also significant.

Steve emphasizes that it is important to listen to your customers. Making sure to have enough of the cuts that are most likely to sell is also important.

“You have to be able to manage your inventory,” he said, noting his skills gained from running a deli have helped tremendously in this area of the business.