

Replacement Heifers

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Williamson Cattle Company is a cow-calf ranch in Okeechobee County. Our cow herd is basically made up of Brangus-type cattle. We use Angus and Brangus bulls, and we breed for a 4-month (120-day) season. The cows calve October through January, with 80% of these cows calving during October and November. We select all our potential replacement heifers from the cows that calve in October and November. We cull about 12% of our cow herd every year, so we need approximately 260 head of 2-year-old bred heifers each year to maintain our 2,200-head cow-calf herd. We keep the top 600 head of our early heifers (October through November); from these, we select our replacements as well as animals to sell as bred heifers. Our replacement heifer operation is different from most other ranches' replacement operations in that we send our heifers to Alabama for 10 months to grow and breed.

Heifer calves born in October and November are weaned in late August and weigh about 600 lb. We have 4 months to get these heifers to their target weight of 700 lb. Heifers average 10 months of age when weaned, and we hold them in pens for 2 to 3 days. They spend the next 30 to 45 days on fertilized stargrass and a protein block with Bovatec® or Rumensin®. They consume approximately .75 lb of the block per head per day and gain about .75 lb per head per day during this time.

In late September, fescue pastures in Alabama are ready and the heifers are shipped. It costs about \$14.50 per head for trucking (630 miles * \$1.85/mile @ 80 head/load). Once the heifers are shipped to Alabama, we continue them on the protein block until late November. The fescue is of excellent quality at that time of year and they gain about 1 lb per head per day. In late November these heifers go on a 50% cottonseed-50% soy-

hull feed at the rate of 5 lb per head per day. This feed costs about \$.30 per head per day. Heifers are also fed hay free-choice.

Angus bulls, for easy calving, go in with the heifers December 22 through April 22 (so heifers will calve October through January). If we can get a heifer to 700 lb with the degree of Brahman blood we have in our cattle (25 to 50%), we can expect to have over 70% of our heifers breed in the first 60 days, and over 90% in 120 days. The heifers that breed the first 60 days in this system are normally the larger (older) heifers and often exhibit more Angus than Brahman breeding.

We pregnancy-check heifers at a time when we can determine which were bred the first 60 days; we select our 260 head of replacements from this group. The rest, we offer for sale as bred heifers along with the heifers that breed the second 60 days. We require a very short calving season (60 days or less) for our program so that, when these calves are born in October and November, they can be managed for their exclusive nutritional needs. The 260 head selected for replacements stay in Alabama until June; when we ship them back to Okeechobee, they weigh around 925 lb. It costs about \$11.50 per head for trucking (630 miles * \$1.00/mile @ 54 head/load). The heifers will have gained 325 lb in the 10 months since weaning, or 1.1 lb per day.

We hold the replacement heifers in Okeechobee on some good pastures until they start calving in October. We check the heifers once a day, but only a very few of them require assistance calving. Once they begin calving, about every 20 days we go in on horseback and ride out the heifers that have calved into a fertilized pasture. We use a pasture renovation program and have about 300

to 400 acres of ryegrass every year. The heifers will go on the ryegrass as soon as it is available (December). These heifers get the best pasture available because they were bred as yearlings to calve as 2-year-olds and are still growing. If we get concerned about the heifer's body condition dropping too much after she calves and before the ryegrass becomes available, we feed her a few lb whole cottonseed per day. It is a lot easier to *maintain* body condition than to try to put condition on. For a 2-year-old heifer with calf to breed at $\geq 90\%$ pregnancy rate, she needs to be one body condition score higher (BCS 5) than she would need to be at age 4 to 10. The 7 months after she calves is the most critical time in her nu-

tritional life: she must not only rebreed, but continue to grow, to ensure she calves on a 12-month interval and grows to her genetic potential.

Table 1. Heifer health program

Calves Spring (3–5 months old)	IBR, BVD, PI3, BRSV, 8-way blackleg, Bang's vaccine, Syno-C, deworm
Weaning Summer (10 months old)	IBR, BVD, PI3, BRSV, trich, lepto, vibrio, deworm, defluke
Pre-Breeding November 10	Trich, lepto, vibrio, deworm, defluke
Post-Breeding Spring	Pregnancy-check, deworm

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