



LOG OUT

STORE

MY ACCOUNT

E-EDITION



✓ Hello colleens@livestockweekly.com, you are now logged in!

Seedstock Producer Shares Some Interesting Opinions

By Colleen Schreiber on Wednesday, January 7, 2026

KINGSVILLE — The pursuit of heavier harvest weights and higher quality carcasses, and how those two together impact selection decisions, was one of the topics of discussion at the King Ranch Institute's annual Holt Cat Symposium on Excellence in Ranch Management held in November.

James Henderson, co-owner of Bradley 3 Ranch (B3R) in Childress and Donnelly counties, began his remarks by echoing what nearly every other speaker at the two-day event had said: carcass weights are on the rise. Over the past 60 years, average carcass weights have increased by about four pounds per year. Notably, in just the past two years, carcass weights have risen by 46 pounds.

Henderson reminded that genetic mating decisions are made eight to 15 years in advance of any animals being harvested.

"If that's the case and we're seeing that kind of accelerated rate in carcass weights, where are we going to be in eight to 15 years?"

Henderson told the group that beef production is a math equation. Getting at the result is complicated because, as Dr. David Lalman of Oklahoma State University explained in his presentation, the costs in the cow-calf business are calculated on a per acre basis, while all revenue is figured on a per pound basis.

"Doing that math doesn't work because they're not the same denominator," said Henderson. "We either need to put our revenue on a per acre basis, or we need to put cost on a per pound basis."

And other sectors, stockers, feeders, packers, even wholesalers and retail, figure costs on a per head basis and revenue on a per pound basis.

"Doing the math that way, the equation always says to make them bigger," said Henderson.

He reminded, too, that a bigger cow costs more to produce, and it's the cow calf sector that has invested the most to make them bigger. Yet weaning weights have not increased.

"If I've increased my costs by paying more for genetics and it's costing more to run a cow, I want more return."

He shared how in the first 100 years of "modern" beef production, cattle cycles occurred every 10 years. Then COVID happened. That occurrence and a couple of big droughts wrecked the norm of the cattle cycle, said Henderson.

Also, inputs are all higher, John Deere tractors, pickups, fertilizer, labor, most everything on the production end is higher. Yet relative to what the consumer earns, beef is the same cost as it was 40 years ago, he told the group.

After he and his wife, Mary Lou, sold their packing house and moved back to the ranch, they really began digging into the numbers. They realized the numbers wouldn't work for them. At that time, they were running 150 cows.

They began working the numbers and digging into what could be tried to improve the numbers. For one, they needed to make cows that were going to perform on forage. Research shows that, on average, 25 percent of cows are going to perform the same on forage as they do on concentrate. However, to really get somewhere, Henderson understood that it was important to know which cows were performing. Thus, for starters, they began doing a forage gain test on all their bulls. That data is published for all to see. He explained that the gain test is important because forage is the food source for most of their cows.

They also began to compare the percent of bodyweight weaned from individual cows. Averages may be okay, but again, knowing individual performance is better, said Henderson.

"Every cow is an individual factory," he reminded.

To get at that answer, they began to weigh every cow and collect the 205-day weights on the calf to get the percentage of body weight weaned. Initially, their cows were weaning right around 50 percent of their bodyweight. They knew that the number needed to increase. Through their extra efforts, it has. This year, their cows weaned, on average, 58 percent of their bodyweight, and they had their first cow that weaned 80 percent of her bodyweight compared to all her contemporaries.

"Think about that. A cow that weans 80 percent of her bodyweight and breeds back can begin to affect operational costs in a positive way," said Henderson.

Still another measurement they began to follow closely is calves weaned to cows exposed. He stressed that the only way to do this is to base it on an 18-month calendar. When they started, their cows were at the industry average, which Henderson noted has held constant at 78 percent for the past 40 years. This year, B3R was at 86 percent.

"It's all about the math," he reminded. "I used to be a packer, and packers pretty well have the math figured out, but in the cow calf business, we've not done a very good job of that."

Another comment he's heard all his life is the need to get the three-year-olds to breed at the same rate as the cows.

"It's tough because she's lactating, shedding teeth, and trying to grow while trying to rebreed," Henderson reminded.

Now what he tries to do is get the heifers to where he thinks their mature weight should be by the time they have their first calf.

"That way they're not still trying to grow while they are shedding teeth and lactating."

It requires consistent nutrition, which he acknowledged is expensive, but he said getting better first and second breed up more than pays for the added inputs. Proof is in the numbers. This year, their three-year-olds were two-tenths of a percent higher in breed up than the rest of the cow herd.

Still another tool they incorporated is turning bulls out for only 45 days.

"The quickest way to increase weaning weights, on average, is to shorten the breeding season," he reminded.

This season already, 23 days into their calving season, 92 percent of the cows had already calved.

Putting all that together, the Hendersons realized the math was finally beginning to work. Today they're running 500 cows, and there is more grass than the ranch has ever had, though he acknowledged 2025 was an awfully good year.

"It's nice to ride out across there in stirrup tall grass, and we're running three plus times as many cows as that ranch used to ever run," he reiterated.

Today, their cows, on average, weigh 1175 pounds.

"Her ability to eat less, produce more, and rebreed is pretty amazing," said Henderson.

He acknowledged that every environment is different, and getting things accomplished may be harder or easier for some, but the encouragement to participants was to really get their mind around what they do and how they do it. Knowing cow weights and keeping those stable over time is not an easy thing to do. It requires understanding of the math, concentration, effort and time, Hendeson reiterated.

He turned then to the beef side of the equation, the eating part, noting like many of the symposium speakers, that consumers got hooked on good beef. Consequently, today there is as much Prime product as there is Select. As a meat scientist, five to 10 years ago, he would have never thought that possible. He worried that increasing the supply of Prime, CAB and Choice products would severely narrow the Choice Select spread. Instead, the spread is as wide as it's ever been.

"Today Prime is bringing the largest premium that it's ever brought," said Henderson. "That tells us that we haven't begun to meet the demand that's out there."

He also told participants that his view is that marbling may be a more important reproductive trait than it is a quality trait. He based that opinion on data gathered as an independent packer. They tracked the performance of the animals that came through their plant from all over the U.S. What he noticed was that animals that came from desert environments always had higher marbling scores than those from good grass country. He began to really give that some thought, and the conclusion was that cows in desert country have very short time periods of optimum nutrition. That means they need to be able to store energy quickly while it's available.

"The most accessible place to store energy is in the intramuscular fat," said Henderson. "It's the most transient, it's the easiest to store, and it's the most readily available when the cow needs it."

He pointed to Longhorns and Corrientes and how these cattle evolved and consequently were able to grow and marble without any extra inputs, without a feed bucket in front of them.

"They had to survive and reproduce and be able to move long distances and over time through natural selection, those cattle that had the highest marbling genetics were the ones that were selected in those breeds by nature."

His question then to the group was whether seedstock producers could select for marbling and fertility at the same time.

"What a win that would be."

Henderson has also been on the front lines of the yield grade equation discussion and the need to modernize it. Again, his time as a packer provided him with lots of data, and he wasn't satisfied with the ability to pay for the true value of carcasses. Part of the issue he saw was with YG.

He reminded that the YG equation developed in 1958 was based on 260 Hereford steers whose average carcass weight was 600 pounds. They looked nothing like the animals being harvested today.

"We're talking about 1500-pound carcasses today," he stressed.

Also, the equation was written for carloads of beef.

"It did a decent job of predicting boneless, closely trimmed retail cuts for that time, but we didn't adopt it until 1965, and it's not been touched since the equation was written in 1958."

He also told the group that ribeye size is one trait that seedstock producers have chased and chased without much success. The issue is that it's one of the four components of the YG equation. The correlation of ribeye to muscle is anywhere from zero to 20 percent, depending on which meat scientist's data are being considered.

"One thing that's heard a lot now is that ribeyes are too big and yet we continue to select cattle on something that has very little correlation to muscle and muscle is what we sell in the business," said Henderson.

Much to the dismay of breed associations, Henderson has even suggested that perhaps the industry should do away with ribeye EPDs.

"We're spending a lot of time and a lot of money buying things that are detrimental to what we sell, things that have no correlation to the total," he told the group. "How much sense does that make?"

Those working on the yield grade equation are now at the point where meat scientists will be doing cutting tests and using CT technology and AI to get to a sellable yield. He further explained that right now, the industry is putting all this fat on the outside of cattle, largely because of days on feed, and then it takes a tremendous number of BTUs to chill that fat and trim it on the fab floor, which is difficult to do. Then it takes a tremendous number of BTUs to render all the fat that's cut off.

"None of that makes any sense," said Henderson. "If we can figure out how to determine which cattle are going to have more sellable yield then that fat can be taken off on the kill floor when it's hot and we don't have to use all those BTUs to chill it; we don't have to pay the \$30 or \$35 an hour labor to cut it off, and we don't have to use more BTUs to get it hot again."

Rounding out the discussion, he reminded listeners again that it takes eight to 15 years after a mating decision is made to see the result, and it's the responsibility of the production side of the equation to figure out what the consumer is going to want in 15 years.

Summing it up, Henderson told participants the goal is for those in the cow-calf business to more quickly recoup their investment and begin to reap more benefits on the production side of the business. Then the playing field could be leveled some.

"As we move forward, as we try to rebuild the herd, in selecting cows, we have math to do," Henderson reiterated again. "We've got a lot of measurements that tend to be lying under the surface of things that make us money that we probably don't know how to do or do a very good job of tracking within our operations, and we've got to keep that consumer in mind."

"That's my challenge to each of us to take that responsibility seriously. If we do that, the opportunities for our industry are infinitely bigger than we've ever dreamed," he concluded.



San Angelo, TX 76903 38 °F 58 °F

PRODUCERS
LIVESTOCK AUCTION COMPANY

Coming Up – Sales/Events

Livestock Weekly
20,431 followers

[Follow Page](#) [Share](#)

Livestock Weekly
about a week ago

January 5th, 1967
Vol. 18-No.46

"YOU THINK YOU HAVE TROUBLES?
Well, look at this old buffalo bull-or maybe your sympathies will go to the men trying to get him in the squeeze chute. When the brucellosis testing program came to Archer County in North Texas, it said "all bovines" had to be blood tested for bangs. This included Carter McGregor's buffalo herd. Dr. Raymond Hander, the vet who tested them, took the easy way out on the big bulls and older cows by bleeding them from ... [See more](#)

