Central NY Beef Breeders looking to pool calves for December sale

Ron Maidens had been a dairy farmer the majority of his life, going into partnership with his brother Etsel in 1963. “When I started in the dairy business I didn’t know much, I was just a kid out of high school,” he fondly remembers, “I didn’t know anything, I had a good county agent and I was self-taught.” Originally from West Virginia, Ron and his brother “farmed three states”, as he puts it – West Virginia, Pennsylvania and now New York. Ron and his wife raised 7 children, his brother, 5 — and they did it milking cows for nearly 50 years.

Ron always had a few beef cattle on the farm, so when the dairy business became unprofitable, he turned to cattle. “I thought this beef business was simple, anybody can do it — it is very complicated”, he said with a serious tone. Ron points out that the cooler temps of New York are much easier on cattle than other places, “If you go 300 miles south of here, you have 150 days of hay, up here you have 150 days of pasture.”

Today, he manages about 60 head of Angus beef cattle on his farm in Laurens, NY (Otsego County). Ron embraced the challenge of transition, immersing himself in this new business by going to as many cattle auctions and meetings as he could, educating himself just as he did when he was a younger man, “I wish I had done it 10 years earlier,” he confessed.

Ron believes the biggest problem with beef in the central New York area is the market, “we don’t have the market they have out west — we don’t even have the market they have in western New York.”

Earlier this year, Ron became involved with the Central New York Beef Breeders, a group of like-minded farmers looking to improve the beef cattle industry within their multi-county region. After years of learning the beef business on his own, he is happy to exchange information and help guide the group as a member of its steering committee.
The group has met several times over the last few months and according to retired USDA-Farm Services Agency Director Bill Gibson, who is also a member of the group, their goal is to advance the profitability and efficiency of raising beef in the region. “It’s been people like Ron that have made this happen, it’s commitment and coming back meeting after meeting to share their ideas and a willingness to help — it’s about pooling calves,” he said, as he continued his thought, “If we can grow them that first season with their mothers on the pasture and then market them directly to somebody else in a better location, with grain and better feedlot situations, that seems to make sense for our area.”

In mid-June, members of the beef breeders group toured 12 farms in Otsego, Herkimer and Delaware Counties to assess potential calves for market. According to Bill, the members, along with Cornell University’s Beef Specialist Dr. Mike Baker, found roughly 50 calves that have the potential to grow to meet the goals of large or medium frame with good muscling. “Levi Geyer will come up and guarantee the grade, then we’re looking for 500-pounds,” he added, the group’s goal is to get roughly 100 head of livestock ready for market later this winter.

Levi Geyer is the USDA’s Regional Supervisor for the Northeast Livestock, Grain and Poultry Markets and is based in Pennsylvania. He says, “There is a lot of underutilized pasture throughout New York State,” and is hopeful that the Central New York Beef Breeders group will meet the 50,000 pound requirement for a feeder calf pool.

Later this month, on Aug. 27, there will be an important meeting that will outline and address the steps and practices need for producing quality beef. The workshop, titled Beef Quality Assurance: Training and Certification, will be held at Hoskings Sales, 6096 State Highway 8 in New Berlin, NY.

Dr. Baker will be leading the classroom portion of the workshop; the hope is to bring beef producers together to form a network, where they can all contribute quality livestock to the feeder pool for sale at Empire Livestock in Dryden, NY. Bill says they have had consistent attendance and consistent interest. Ron, who already has an established market for his beef, has committed at least 10 head, including 5 steers, “I’m going to put some calves in this (feeder pool) because I think it’s important.”

It took Ron a long time to establish his beef business and he’s hoping his efforts will help the group, “If we can prove ourselves in marketing this first group of cattle, they may take two groups when we prove ourselves.” Both members are looking forward to the upcoming Beef Quality Assurance workshop later this month, “If we can get another six or so people to commit five or six we should be on target,” said Bill.

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