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*Image courtesy of the USDA.*

## USDA announces \$8.5 million sterile facility to battle NWS

[Taryn Cox \(/authors/7269-taryn-cox\)](#)

June 20, 2025

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins launched the construction of an \$8.5 million sterile fly dispersal facility on June 18 at the Moore Air Base in Edinburg, Texas, and announced a comprehensive five-pronged plan to bolster the USDA's efforts to control New World screwworm (NWS).

With the invasive parasite now just 700 miles away from the U.S.-Mexico border, many congressmen and agriculture groups are in strong support of the plan. Organizations such as the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA) and the Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA) have been lobbying for the construction of such a facility since late 2024.

"We do not take lightly the threat NWS poses to our livestock industry, our economy and our food supply chain," Rollins said. "The United States government will use all resources at its disposal to push back NWS, and today's announcement of a domestic strategy to bolster our border defenses is just the beginning. We have the proven tools, strong domestic and international partnerships, and the grit needed to win this battle."

"Today's announcement is pivotal in protecting the U.S. cattle industry. Sterile flies are the only known way to stop the reproduction and continued expansion of New World screw-worm, and it's assuring to see Secretary Rollins follow through on her early commitments to increasing production of sterile flies domestically," said TSCRA First Vice President Stephen Diebel in a USDA press release.

"This isn't going to be easy, and it isn't going to be quick, but we have to do what is proper and right," said NCBA President Buck Wehrbein on *Beltway Beef*, expressing his support for the USDA's announcement. "I feel like we are in good hands with Secretary Rollins – she understands the importance."

Key facets of the New World Screwworm Domestic Readiness and Response Policy Initiative include:

- Stop the pest from spreading in Mexico and ensure we are full partners in eradication.
- Protect the U.S. border at all costs.
- Maximize our readiness.
- Take the fight to the screwworm.
- Innovate our way to eradication.

The Moore Air Base previously served as a sterile fly dispersal facility during the NWS outbreak of the 1960s and is intended to do the same under the newly unveiled plan. The construction of the dispersal facility is set to be completed by the end of the year. During the announcement, Secretary Rollins also added that the USDA is exploring the possibility of building a sterile fly production facility at the base that could produce almost 300 million flies weekly. The construction of a domestic production facility would take two to three years, however.

The Panama-United States Commission for the Eradication and Prevention of Screwworm (COPEG), located in Pacora, Panama, is currently the only operational sterile fly production facility. COPEG is producing around 117 million sterile flies weekly, but at least 300 million

flies are needed to be successful at eradicating the invasive parasite. Between 400 million and 500 million sterile flies were released weekly during the 1960s outbreak to effectively eradicate NWS from the U.S.

COPEG is located south of the current outbreak that is pushing northward. This results in sterile flies nearing the end of their lifespans by the time they reach the infested area.

Construction of the dispersal facility in Texas (only 20 miles from the Mexican border), coupled with the renovation of a fruit fly production facility in Metapa, Mexico, will help ease the strain on COPEG. Sterile flies hatched at COPEG and the Metapa facility will be transported to Texas to finish growing closer to the outbreak and be released with more time to mate.

The USDA is working alongside Texas animal health authorities and the Texas Department of Agriculture to not only build a reserve of current treatments but also develop new treatment options and preventative measures. They are also inspecting trucks at the border for signs of pests and disease.

Sid Miller, Texas Agriculture Commissioner, explained that the state is seeking a permit to administer parasiticide through cattle feed. He noted that the Texas Department of Agriculture has invested \$250,000 in fly traps to be put along the Rio Grande River.

The USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has deployed cattle fever tick riders along the Rio Grande to inspect animals along the border and prevent the spread of NWS into the U.S. Rollins is set to meet with the tick riders to see firsthand the crucial work they are doing in spotting and combating the parasite.

To get feedback on sterile fly production technology, eradication tools and technologies aside from sterile fly production, the benefits and barriers, including timelines and costs of enhanced domestic versus international sterile fly production, and other innovative ideas, the USDA is planning to hold four public listening sessions in the near future.



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*Getty Images.*

## Why more feeder cattle are moving north

Dynamics are creating a movement to more Northern feedlots and taking from the strongholds such as Texas and Kansas.

[Taryn Cox \(/authors/7269-taryn-cox\)](#)

June 3, 2025

Typically, feeder cattle concentrations have shifted north from Kansas and Texas into states such as Iowa and Nebraska in the summer months; however, the industry has seen new movement beginning earlier this year.

The USDA's Cattle on Feed reports indicated an 18% decrease in U.S. placements from February to May, with the June report maintaining this pattern. Southern states have held long-term dominance of the feeder cattle industry, but factors such as feed economics, climate, herd dynamics, high cattle prices and packing infrastructure are driving cattle into Northern feedlots. "This is part of a multidecade adjustment," says Dr. Glynn Tonsor, a livestock economist at Kansas State University. "Shifts in where processing facilities are, where water availability is a concern and access to evolving feedstuffs all have a role here." The result: a geographic shift that may permanently alter the feedlot industry.

From February to May 2025, USDA Cattle on Feed reports showed a clear regional difference in feeder cattle placements. In February, placements fell sharply nationwide, down 18% from last year, driven largely by steep drops in Texas (-27% at 260,000 head) and Kansas (-22% at 360,000 head). Although national placements recovered somewhat at a 5% increase in March, Southern states continued to struggle, with Texas down 14% at 360,000 head and Kansas down 5% at 440,000 head compared to last year.

April's national placements slipped again, down 3%, with Texas dropping 6.1% with 310,000 head, though Kansas posted a small gain of 2.7% at 87,000 head. In May, the trend continued: Placements were down 3% nationally, with Texas and Kansas declining 5% and 4% at 295,000 and 360,000 head, respectively.

In contrast, Northern states showed strength. Nebraska and Iowa saw increases of 4% and 7% at 480,000 and 156,000 head, respectively, in May placements. These figures reinforce the broader trend: Southern Plains states are seeing continued contraction, while Northern regions remain stable or are gaining ground.

Iowa has become an extremely competitive player in the grain-based ethanol production industry, producing a record-breaking 4.6 billion gallons in 2023 and maintaining that production throughout 2024. This level of output solidifies Iowa's role as the nation's top ethanol producer and reinforces the state's influence on feedlot economics in the region.

Ethanol byproducts such as wet distillers grains (WDGs) and dry distillers grains (DDGs) are valuable livestock feed inputs. These byproducts are not only rich in protein and energy but are also cost-effective. On average, WDGs and DDGs are between 4%-10% cheaper to feed than corn, which remains elevated in price despite projections of a small drop in 2025. Because Nebraska and Iowa are densely packed with ethanol plants, feedlots in the region have immediate and low-cost access to these feed inputs. In contrast, Southern feedlots such as Kansas and Texas, face higher feed and transportation costs.

Feedlots in Nebraska and Iowa have increased profitability due to a combination of higher premiums and proximity to major beef packers. Nebraska is home to three of the largest packers in the country – Cargill (Schuyler), JBS (Grand Island) and Tyson (Dakota City) – all

located within a short haul from most Northern feedyards. This closeness reduces transportation costs and shrink, making it easier and cheaper to move finished cattle to slaughter. Additionally, Northern feedlots routinely offer higher grid premiums for Prime-graded carcasses and those in branded programs such as Certified Angus Beef. Nebraska and Iowa usually show a more stable cattle basis (the difference between local cash prices and the futures market), as well, compared to Kansas and Texas feedlots, which translates to higher local bids on cattle.

Interestingly, while much of Nebraska is currently facing extreme drought, feedlot placements have remained steady. Moderate to extreme drought conditions have spread throughout most of the state. Yet despite these challenges, Nebraska and Iowa continue to see stable or increasing cattle placements, which can be explained by resource and infrastructure distribution.

Many of the large feedlots and packing plants are in eastern Nebraska, which has received some timely rainfall and maintains better access to irrigated feed products. These factors protect many of the cattle-feeding operations in the region from the worst drought-related feed shortages impacting more pasture-dependent areas. Meanwhile, these pasture-dependent areas such as Texas and Kansas have seen significant herd liquidations due to prolonged drought and rising feed costs. Feeder cattle are being shipped north in search of more stable conditions as a result. In this way, drought may be affecting Nebraska's cow-calf sector, but the feedlot sector remains competitive, drawing cattle in from across the country despite the weather conditions.

National cattle herd numbers remain low and heifer slaughter rates are steady, showing little increase in heifer retention rates – all of which are additional factors in the declining Southern feedlot placements. “The reduction in breeding herd and subsequent calf crop has led to long-expected reductions in feedlot placements,” says Tonsor. “This is a national pattern that certainly includes Kansas and Texas.”

With no predicted herd expansion in 2025, feeder cattle placements are becoming increasingly competitive. Additionally, feedlots are holding cattle longer (120-plus days on feed), in part due to higher finishing weight demand but also to maintain cattle on feed amid fewer head available.

Although June feeder cattle placements are not expected to differ significantly from 2024 (about 1%), the data shows a continuing northward shift. Rather than a seasonal adjustment, the numbers reflect a long-term structural change in the geography of U.S. cattle feeding, as the industry's center of gravity gradually moves north.

Southern cattle placements are also lower, unsurprisingly, due to the reemergence of New World screwworm and the closing of the southern border to live cattle imports. Mexico has been the source of approximately 1 million head of feeder cattle into Texas, most of which are destined for the feedlots or slaughter. The border closure is expected to increase already high feeder cattle prices and exacerbate the lack of head present in the South – all leading to continued economic strain for the region.

While Southern states remain key players in the feeder cattle sector, the Northern states are gaining dominance as the center of gravity as the sector shifts northward. With Iowa and Nebraska's proximity to major packers, better access to cheap and effective feedstuffs and a more stable market, they have a strategic advantage over the Southern feedyards. Drought, biosecurity threats at the southern border and the continuation of low herd numbers are all contributors to the upward movement of feeder cattle placements, but no single factor is the sole cause of the shift.

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Natalie Kovarik. *Image provided by Natalie Kovarik.*

## RancHER: Natalie Kovarik: Embracing ranch life one role at a time

[Taryn Cox \(/authors/7269-taryn-cox\)](#)

July 9, 2025

*Natalie Kovarik is the co-owner of Kovarik Cattle Co., a first-generation seedstock operation based in central Nebraska, and the co-host of the Discover Ag podcast.*

*Though she was raised on her family's registered Hereford ranch in southwest Montana, she never expected to become a ranch wife, ranch mom – or a rancher herself. Today, she proudly fills all three roles while also playing a key role in the growth of the ranch and managing her other business ventures.*

## **How have your experiences working on your ranch influenced your growth, personally and professionally?**

Looking back, I can see just how much growing up as a ranch kid shaped me into the person I am today. My bravery, resilience, determination and creativity likely all stem from my rural roots. In fact, I'd argue that agriculture played a hand in molding most of my best traits – and, if we're being honest, probably a few of my rougher edges too.

But the same holds true today – even as an adult, the ranch continues to shape me. It refines my resilience, tests my patience and pushes me to grow in ways I never expected. Life in agriculture doesn't just build character in childhood; it continues to build it season after season.

## **What roadblocks have you run into, and how have you overcome them?**

One of the biggest roadblocks I have faced is helping my husband grow our first-generation operation. I know the grass isn't always greener on the other side, so I recognize that generational operations have their challenges and struggles as well. However, it is safe to say that it hasn't been easy, not just to start but also to grow the ranch aggressively. Some of the challenges are finances, but beyond cash flow, there is also a mental and emotional weight of constantly taking risks to grow. I think we have overcome a lot of these challenges by leaning on and being a true support for each other when we are tired or stressed.

## **Who has influenced you in your role as a rancher? Why?**

Hands down, my biggest influence as a rancher has been my husband. His passion for agriculture is truly contagious – he truly loves every part of this way of life, and it's not hard to be inspired when you're around that kind of energy every day. What has impacted me the most, though, is his patience. From the very beginning, he has never made me feel like I had to "measure up" to some expectation; instead, he has created space for me to grow into this role in my own way.

He has always seen our ranch as a family operation – something we do together, not just something he does on his own. His commitment to involving me, and now our kids, has only deepened my love for ranching. Watching him lead with heart, intention and a long-term vision for our family has been one of the most grounding and motivating forces in my life as a rancher.

## **What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given?**

The best piece of advice I've ever been given is that clarity comes through action. You're rarely ever going to feel 100% ready, so don't wait – just start. So much of life, especially in agriculture, is about figuring things out as you go. Whether it's learning a new skill, stepping into a new role or taking on a challenge that feels way bigger than you, the only way to gain confidence or clarity is to do. That mindset has carried me through seasons of doubt and growth alike, and it has reminded me that progress always beats perfection.

## **What advice would you give to other women in your field?**

The advice I'd give to other women in agriculture is to trust your gut. I think as women we've been conditioned to second-guess ourselves – to look outward for permission, validation or the "right" way to do things. However, the most powerful tool we have is our intuition. Your heart knows the way, even when your head is full of doubt. Whether it's deciding for your operation, your family or yourself, lean into that inner knowing. Agriculture needs more women who lead with both strength and soul, and that starts by learning to trust yourself fully.



Natalie stands with her husband and three kids. *Image provided by Natalie Kovarik.*

## **Who are other female models you look up to? Why?**

My podcast co-host, Tara, is a female role model whom I really look up to. It is incredibly powerful to be around someone as motivated and passionate about agriculture and business as I am. Her drive pushes me to be better, and her dedication to this industry inspires me every day. Beyond that, having a friendship like ours makes the work even more rewarding. It's rare and special to have that kind of support and partnership, and I'm grateful for it.

## **How do you balance work with family time?**

For me, balance comes down to teamwork. My husband and I approach everything – ranching, parenting and life – as a team. We know that life ebbs and flows with seasons where one is busier or more stretched than the other, and we try to give each other grace and support in those moments. A win for one is a win for both of us.

## **What accomplishment are you most proud of?**

One of the accomplishments I'm most proud of is starting our first-generation ranch. My husband grew up around agriculture through his maternal grandparents, but he didn't inherit a working ranch or even land and cattle. Everything he built was through hard work and a lot of learning.

When he first started, his goal was to grow a cow-calf operation, but my husband's passion has always been in the seedstock industry. So after a few years of building a cow-calf operation, he decided to take another risk and start a registered herd from scratch. I am proud to announce that we hosted our second annual in-person sale this past January.

Both the ranch and the herd are still growing, but looking back at how far we've come makes me incredibly proud of what we've built and excited for where we're headed.

## **What inspires you to come to work each day?**

My children. Raising them in this lifestyle – where hard work, responsibility and connection to the land are part of daily life – is something I don't take for granted. I want them to grow up being influenced by ranching, the very same way I was. Every chore, every challenge, every long day feels more meaningful knowing it's shaping not just our operation but also the kind of people our kids will become. They're my "why" in all of this; getting to share this way of life with them is the greatest inspiration of all.

## **What is the best part of your day?**

Loading up the whole family in the Ranger and heading out to the pasture to check cattle on a summer evening. There's something so special about those golden-hour rides with the windows down, kids laughing, the sky painted in sunset colors and cattle scattered across the hills. It's peaceful, grounding and a reminder of why we chose this life. Those quiet, beautiful moments together as a family make all of the hard work worthwhile.

## **What is your favorite thing about ranch life?**

My favorite thing about ranch life is the simplicity it brings. Living out here in the country, away from the noise and the rush, gives me a sense of peace and grounding that's hard to find anywhere else. I know that ranching helps slow me down and appreciate the small, everyday moments that are most important.

# Feddes Red Angus: Raising cattle in Big Sky country

Progressive Cattle Editorial Intern **Taryn Cox**

Outside of the small farming town of Manhattan, Montana, sits Feddes Red Angus. What started as a registered Hereford operation in 1945 has evolved into a multigenerational registered Red Angus operation. The Feddes family has built its cattle business through generations of hard work, ingenuity and an understanding of their place in the industry.

## Starting with Herefords

"My dad bought Herefords in 1945, and that was our start in the registered business," Chuck Feddes explains.

Neal Feddes, along with his brothers, established the Hereford herd in 1945. After Neal passed away, his son Chuck continued running Herefords with his uncle and cousins before they split the ranch in 1984. After that, Chuck realized he needed to make a change.

"I saw the handwriting on the wall," he remarks. "There were tons of Hereford bulls right in our area, and demand was slipping, so we needed to do something different."

Chuck bought his first Red Angus females in 1991 and continued to build the herd through years of extensive A.I. and embryo transfer (ET) work. To this day, you can still

find cow lines going back to those original females – a lasting reflection of the foundation that was laid and the legacy the Feddes family is building.

## It's all about balance

Today, Chuck and Carol Feddes continue to run the ranch with their children and grandchildren. Every member has different roles but with the same goal – to deliver high-quality Red Angus cattle.

For the Feddes family, everything starts with the cow herd. "The cow herd is our factory," they often say – a philosophy that guides every breeding decision they make. Their focus is on balance: producing functional, high-quality females that in turn raise exceptional bulls. But that balance doesn't happen by chance. The Feddeses are unapologetically strict when it comes to culling. If a cow has a bad udder, poor feet, a bad attitude or any trait that compromises longevity or efficiency, she's out – sent to the sale barn or their meat shop. In their view, having the right factory makes everything possible; without it, it's an uphill battle from the start.

"You know, we try to breed for balance," Chuck explains. "We're not chasing any extremes. We feel

Chuck and grandson Cordon bring the cows home.



like extremes will always get people in trouble."

## The sales

The Feddes family hosts two in-person sales each year: the Big Sky Elite Female Sale in December and their annual spring bull sale. For both sales, the Feddeses have partnered with other Red Angus breeders in their area. The Big Sky Elite Sale includes four cooperating breeders, while the bull sale features two. Over time, Chuck and his



**Taryn Cox**  
Editorial Intern  
*Progressive Cattle*

family have built close lasting relationships with their fellow breeders – bonds that feel more like extended family. These partnerships have proven mutually beneficial for everyone involved.

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Images provided by Carol Feddes.



Feddes Red Angus is a family operation. Pictured from left to right are Hunter, McKenzie, Ella, Alyssa, Jake, Chuck, Carol, Oliver, Sawyer, Jeremy, Becky, Cordon and Tera.

"We can get together and just put more numbers together, potentially drawing some bigger buyers and spreading the genetics," Chuck explains.

In addition to their live sales, the family hosts an annual spring online genetics sale, offering semen and embryos as a way to sell and market their frozen genetics. Additionally, several of their top-tier bulls have been selected by leading A.I. companies such as Select Sires and ABS, where their genetics are now marketed on a worldwide scale.

## The meat shop

Chuck's son Jake had always wanted to integrate a "pasture to plate" business into the family's operation – and COVID-19 opened the door

for that. They recognized the demand for a local, consistent protein supply when they sold three cows' worth of hamburger in under 24 hours.

In May 2020, the family purchased a local meat shop that had been in operation since the 1940s, and Feddes Family Meats was founded. Currently, the meat shop employs 17 people, with Jake and Becky managing the "30,000-foot-view" of the business.

While the Feddes family supplies a small portion of the beef for the meat shop, most of the beef sold through the shop is sourced from other local producers. When the family purchased the shop, it operated almost entirely as a custom processing facility. However, Jake has shifted the facility's focus away from custom processing and instead

concentrates on expanding its retail presence. Today, Feddes Family Meats offers beef at restaurants in Bozeman and has expanded to include a mobile sales trailer – affectionately called the "Chuck Wagon" – that travels to locations around the Gallatin Valley.

## What's in store

Looking ahead, the Feddes operation continues to grow with the next generation. Jake's role as Superior Livestock representative has helped their customers market calves, adding another layer of service into the business. Chuck and Carol's grandson Cord is now working on the ranch full-time after graduating high school. As the family continues to work with larger commercial operations – many of which purchase multiple bulls each year – their commitment to service remains unchanged.

"We still want to be able to take care of the customers and help with marketing calves if they want that," Chuck says.

At its core, Feddes Red Angus is a story of adaptability, dedication and family. From registered Herefords to a vertically integrated Red Angus operation, the Feddes family has stayed true to their values while evolving with the times. With multiple generations involved and a commitment to doing things the right way, they're not just preserving a legacy – they're building one.

*Colossians 3:17 – And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. (KJV)*

**Today, Chuck and Carol Feddes continue to run the ranch with their children and grandchildren. Every member has different roles but with the same goal – to deliver high-quality Red Angus cattle.**

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Scott Leibslie

**AT A GLANCE**

Idaho's brucellosis rule is under review through Gov. Brad Little's Zero-Based Regulation order, requiring full evaluation, public input and legislative approval to maintain Idaho's brucellosis-free status.

# Idaho's brucellosis rule under review this year

Ag Proud – Idaho Editorial Intern **Taryn Cox**

In 2020, Gov. Brad Little signed Executive Order 2020-01, known as Zero-Based Regulation. The order requires every Idaho administrative rule to be repealed and either allowed to expire or reissued after a complete and thorough evaluation.

Under this order, the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA) must review the brucellosis rule and justify each part before it can be renewed. There will be no automatic continuation of the rule in its current form.

Zero-Based Regulation places several specific requirements on state agencies. First, the ISDA must conduct a retrospective analysis of the rule to determine if its intended goals are being met and whether the benefits of the regulation outweigh its costs. The department must also evaluate whether there are less restrictive ways to achieve



**Taryn Cox**  
Editorial Intern  
Ag Proud – Idaho  
editor@agproud.com

the same objectives. Any changes that come out of the review process must maintain or reduce the existing level of regulatory burden on producers. Agencies are encouraged to remove outdated, redundant or overly complex provisions when rewriting their rules.

The process also requires public involvement before any changes are finalized. ISDA must post its retrospective analysis on its website before holding public hearings. At least two public hearings are required to allow producers, veterinarians, and other stakeholders to weigh in. One of these hearings was held June 17, and the second

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took place July 15. Once ISDA finalizes its proposed version of the brucellosis rule, it will go to the Idaho Legislature in early 2026. Lawmakers will decide whether to approve or reject the changes, and if they pass, the new version will take effect July 1, 2026.

Idaho's state veterinarian, Scott Leibsle, shares more about what was discussed at the public hearings and where the brucellosis rule currently stands:

**Q How has stakeholder participation shaped the rule-making process so far, and is there still an opportunity for public input before the end of the year?**

**LEIBSLE:** Multiple stakeholders participated in the two negotiated rule-making meetings this summer – by far the most well attended of all the animal industries rules negotiated this year. Unless there is a specific request to hold a public hearing, stakeholders may still submit their thoughts/position on the rule/program in writing to ISDA and it will be added to the rule-making record.

**Q Will any changes be made to the 02.40.20 brucellosis rule based off those hearings?**

**LEIBSLE:** The proposed rule that will be presented to the 2026 Idaho Legislature contains no significant changes to the brucellosis program. The stakeholders that participated in the negotiated rule-making meeting were largely supportive of all aspects of the brucellosis program.

Maintaining a brucellosis-free cattle industry remains one of ISDA's top priorities and we will continue to aggressively pursue any and all options, resources and strategies that will further prevent the disease from affecting Idaho's cattle industry in the most cost-effective way possible.

**Q Do you feel that 02.40.20 has played a key role in keeping Idaho brucellosis-free? And can you share any numbers that show its success?**

**LEIBSLE:** Yes. From October 2023 to September 2024, the Idaho brucellosis lab conducted nearly 400,000 brucellosis tests. See **Table 1** – MCI stands for market cattle identification, which is the term used to describe cattle that are tested for brucellosis at slaughter.

With nearly 400,000 animals tested, there were zero Idaho cattle identified as brucellosis reactors during this time period. The year prior to this, only one Idaho cow was identified as a brucellosis reactor with about 500,000 animals tested.

What this data tells us is that Idaho's brucellosis testing program is so effective that if/when a reactor is found, it's identified well before it's had an opportunity to spread to multiple animals. Since the source of the disease will likely never go away (wildlife in Yellowstone park), the current state of the program is the very best we can hope for in terms of time and ability to identify infected animals.

**Q Are there any other programs within the livestock industry that are being reviewed under Gov. Brad Little's executive order? Or is there anything else you would like readers to know?**

**TABLE 1**

*Breakdown of all the brucellosis tests taken last fiscal year*

Species	Total yearly
Live	17,571
MCI	375,381
BRT	66
Live bison	48
Slaughter bison	2,233
Live elk	225
Slaughter elk	46
Hunter elk	266
Live other	770
Dead other	37
<b>All slaughter</b>	<b>377,697</b>
<b>Total samples</b>	<b>396,643</b>

**LEIBSLE:** The other administrative rules that were opened for negotiation this year are:

IDAPA 02.04.26 – Rules Governing the Public Exchange of Livestock

IDAPA 02.04.24 – Rules Governing Tuberculosis

IDAPA 02.02.11 – Rules Governing Eggs and Egg Products **AG**

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# Building meaningful customer relationships in the seedstock business

Progressive Cattle Editorial Intern **Taryn Cox**

## AT A GLANCE

Success in the seedstock business hinges on clear communication, trust and honesty. Longtime sale manager and seedstock breeder Garrett Knebel, along with Tierra and Randy Kessler of Kessler Angus, share insights on how producers can build strong, dependable relationships with their customers.

When customers walk onto the lot on sale day, they are not just looking for new replacement heifers or a herd bull. They're also searching for a sense of trust, the feeling that they're doing business with people who stand behind their cattle and the reassurance that, long after the sale is final, someone will still pick up the phone when they call. In an industry where seedstock can be bought anywhere, how producers treat and develop relationships with their customers can define the long-term success of an operation. Garrett Knebel, a veteran sale manager and seedstock breeder, and Tierra and Randy Kessler of Kessler Angus shared their insights on how producers can create meaningful, long-lasting relationships with customers.

Every operation – and every customer – has different goals, priorities and ways of doing business.

As Knebel explains, it all starts with clarity.

"The potential customers you could have in selling cattle varies widely," Knebel says. "Are you selling bulls? To registered or commercial producers? Are you selling females? Weaned calves? Show cattle?"

Each type of buyer has unique expectations, and meeting them requires more than a one-size-fits-all approach.

At Kessler Angus, that means taking the time to understand what each customer's program needs to succeed. For some, it's calving ease and dependable disposition; for others, it's predictable performance and consistent, heavy calves. When buyers walk through the bull pens, the Kesslers are up front about which

***"If you know who your customer is, how they operate and what is important to them, you've solved 80 percent of the equation."***

—Garrett Knebel,  
veteran sale manager and  
seedstock breeder

sire groups will fit – and which ones won't. Even if it means telling someone they might be better off with a different bull, the goal is to make sure the customer leaves confident in their purchase.

Knebel puts it simply: "If you know who your customer is, how they operate and what is important to them, you've solved 80 percent of the equation."

That understanding doesn't just guide the sale itself – it shapes how producers communicate, how they follow up and how they stand behind their cattle when challenges inevitably come up.

Honesty isn't a sales tactic to the Kesslers – it's the cornerstone of their business. When customers come to view cattle, they often hear more about what the Kesslers don't like in the animal before they hear about its strengths.

"Oftentimes, you'll hear things we don't like or would change about a cow before we brag on what she has done right," Tierra shares. "We want customers to know as much as we do about these cattle so they can be successful in their own programs."

Some buyers are surprised to hear a producer talk them out of a certain animal, but that candor pays off in the long run. It creates trust and enables customers to make decisions that set their own operations up for success.

Knebel has seen the same principle at work from the sale management side. While the product matters, what people remember most is whether they felt respected and informed.

"The strongest customer experience and relationship is built when the conversation goes deeper than, 'How is the bull doing?' That's where the true connection is made," Knebel says.

Clear, proactive communication can make the difference between a one-time buyer and a lifelong customer. Not returning calls or failing to follow up after a sale are missteps that can damage trust.

For the Kesslers, staying in touch is a priority that begins well before sale day. They make a point to call prospective buyers in the weeks after catalogs are mailed to remind people



Image by Mike Dixon.

that the sale is coming up, to see if the catalog arrived and to answer any questions about the cattle before sale day. After the sale, if a customer has an issue with the animal – an injury or breeding problem – the Kesslers handle it quickly and respectfully, often replacing or warranting bulls with "few to no questions asked."

Knebel also emphasized the importance of supporting buyers beyond sale day. That might mean helping arrange transportation, making sure registration papers get transferred or simply being available when customers call with questions later in the season.

In today's market, communication isn't limited to phone calls and catalogs. The Kesslers have built a social media presence to share updates and connect with buyers. Even so, they believe print advertising still carries the most weight when it comes to credibility and reach.

When sale day arrives, it's often the busiest – and most stressful – day of the year. That's why making the experience smooth and welcoming matters. On sale day, Tierra manages check-in and check-out personally, knowing the buyers and their histories, so there are no awkward surprises. "No one wants to hear, 'Let me go check with the owner about that,'" she says. An organized process shows buyers that their time and business are valued.

Helping arrange delivery, having paperwork ready and standing by your guarantees all reinforce your commitment to customer care. When the day is over, buyers remember whether they felt supported and valued or rushed and overlooked.

## Taryn Cox

Editorial Intern  
Progressive Cattle  
[editor@progressivecattle.com](mailto:editor@progressivecattle.com)



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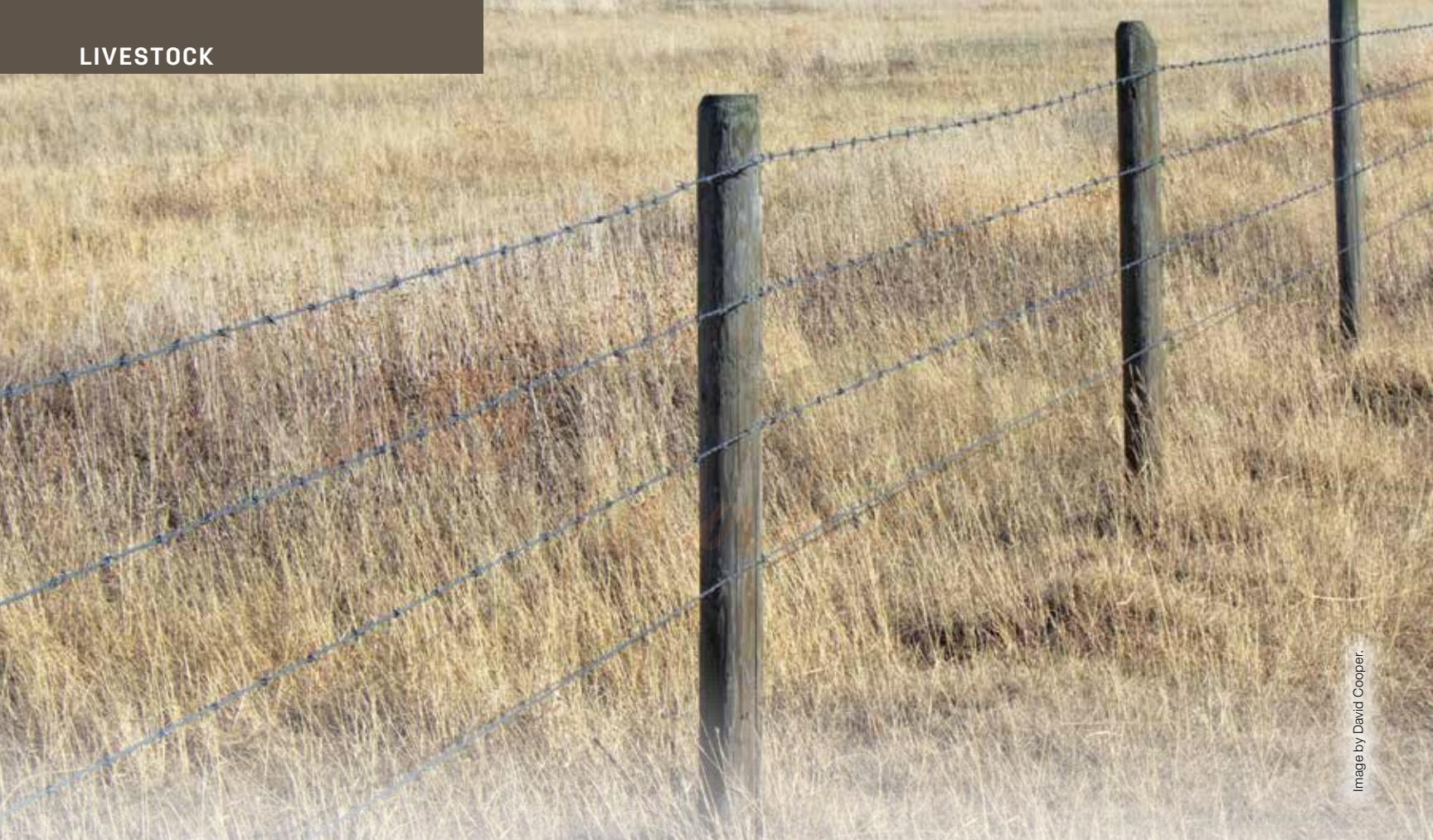


Image by David Cooper.

## Stolen calves in Gooding County show cattle rustling still happens

Taryn Cox for Ag Proud – Idaho

### AT A GLANCE

Earlier this summer, 20 calves were reported stolen in Gooding County. With cattle prices reaching record prices, this incident serves as a reminder that cattle rustling isn't just a thing of the past.

"I wish other producers who have gotten their cattle stolen would speak out about it more, because I would have put more protection measures such as cameras in place," says a Gooding County cattle producer whose calves were stolen under cover of darkness earlier this summer.

For years, there were very few reports of cattle theft in the area – some producers believing that it could be a relic of the past and just something that the old-timers would tell stories about. However, recent thefts in Gooding County show that

cattle rustling never truly went away. It only waits for the right opportunity, and with today's cattle market boasting record-high prices – now is the time.

In this producer's case, the stolen calves were young and unbranded. They were in a pasture several miles away from the producer's home, on the kind of ground where it is nearly impossible to keep eyes on the cattle and watch every gate constantly.

The neighbors noticed something was wrong when they saw the broken fence, and only then did the

producer realize that around 20 calves were missing.

According to the Gooding County Sheriff's Office, hers wasn't the only operation hit. "We haven't had any thefts for years and recently had two different thefts where several unbranded calves were taken," the sheriff shares. "Both in the middle of the night. We have a couple of suspects that we are working on along with ISP [Idaho State Police] and the brand department. We have recovered some of them. I do believe the group was somewhat organized to be able to do what they did at the time of day that they did it."

That idea – that someone could pull up under cover of darkness, sort off a handful of calves and haul them out, causing minimal disturbance – can be hard to accept. But the reality is that today's cattle



**Taryn Cox**  
Editorial Intern  
Ag Proud – Idaho

theft is rarely opportunistic. When young calves go missing, it often means someone has planned ahead, scouted the pasture and knows exactly what they're doing.

Cattle rustling has always been part crime of convenience and part calculated business. The motive isn't hard to understand: Cattle are valuable, easy to transport and in some cases difficult to trace – especially when they're not branded. Unbranded or freshly weaned calves are the perfect targets because proving ownership after the fact can be nearly impossible. Once stolen cattle are moved

*... in today's cattle business, rustling isn't a story from the 1800s. It's happening here and now, sometimes closer to home than you'd ever imagine. For Idaho producers, the message is clear: Keep watch, document everything and never assume your pastures are too quiet to attract attention.*

across county lines or sold quickly through private channels, they can disappear into the marketing chain almost overnight.

Idaho law requires cattle to be brand-inspected before sale, transport out of state or slaughter. Auction barns must verify proof of ownership before accepting consignments. But while these safeguards help, they can't replace a brand on the animal itself. In some cases, producers have only realized animals were gone after a neighbor or brand inspector called to ask about suspicious cattle showing up at market.

Brand inspectors and law enforcement work together when theft is reported, but recovering stolen calves can still take weeks – or never happen at all. "We have recovered some of them," the sheriff says. But with multiple thefts reported in the same area, it's a reminder that vigilance matters.

While no operation is ever completely immune, there are practical things producers can do to make cattle harder targets. Branding calves early is one of the most effective deterrents, as it makes them unmistakable and much more difficult to sell anonymously. Installing cameras near high-traffic gates and corrals can help capture evidence and discourage thieves from approaching. Additionally,

building strong relationships with neighbors creates an informal network of eyes and ears that can spot unfamiliar vehicles or suspicious activity before a theft occurs.

These practices won't stop every theft, but they can slow down or discourage would-be thieves. The Idaho State Brand Board emphasizes that the faster producers report missing cattle, the more likely a successful recovery becomes. Even if you aren't sure an animal is truly stolen, notifying law enforcement and the brand inspector creates a record – and may help investigators spot a pattern across multiple operations.

For ranchers who have never dealt with theft, it can feel awkward or even embarrassing to admit they've been targeted. However, in today's cattle business, rustling isn't a story from the 1800s. It's happening here and now, sometimes closer to home than you'd ever imagine. For Idaho producers, the message is clear: Keep watch, document everything and never assume your pastures are too quiet to attract attention.

If you suspect cattle theft, contact your county sheriff's office and your district brand inspector immediately. A phone call made quickly can be the difference between a herd recovered and a herd lost. **AG**

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