

## 2017-2020 Alabama Pasture to Rail: the retained ownership educational program for Alabama Cattle Producers

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### **Educational Objectives**

Alabama Pasture to Rail (ALP2R) is the retained ownership program provided by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System's Animal Science and Forages Team. It is designed to accommodate all cattle producers. As such, the goals of the program are:

1. To obtain individual animal data for post-weaning performance, health performance, and carcass merit that can be used to assist producers with selection decisions pertaining to existing breeding, nutrition, and health programs.
2. To educate cattle producers on recommended health practices and custom feeding programs.
3. To provide this data and education to producers, while still being profitable.

### **Program Activities**

From October 2016 through January 2021, 3,299 calves were transported from Alabama to Hy-Plains Feedyard in Montezuma, KS as part of ALP2R. These calves were consigned by 102 different farms across the state, representing all facets of the Alabama beef industry. 1,980 of these calves were shipped from 2017 through 2020 with another 1,111 being shipped in the last year.

The the process of organizing a load starts 3-6 weeks prior to shipping. Potential consignors contact the state-wide coordinator expressing interest and the required health programs, nutritional management, and animal numbers are explained at that time. It is carefully explained to each producer the opportunities and risks associated with retained ownership. Roughly 20% of prospective consignors decline to participate after gaining better understanding of the realities of retained ownership.

Once an estimated 47,000-49,000 lbs. of cattle are consigned, the state-wide coordinator locates a central facility for the cattle to be delivered to and processed. Prior to shipping, each calf is weighed, tagged with an RFID Tag and visual ear tag, graded for USDA muscle and frame scores, and a value is assigned to that animal based on local stockyard values.

The following day, calves shipped to the feedyard. Upon arrival, calves are unloaded into receiving pens with hay and water, and allowed to rest for 24-72 hours before being processed. During feedyard processing, calves are dewormed, vaccinated, implanted, tagged with feedyard identification, and sorted into harvest groups using a cattle management software program that records weight, hip height, and hip length to estimate an optimal harvest date. Prophylactic mass treatment with antibiotics is used at the discretion of feedyard management.

After processing, the calves are assigned to a pen in which they will be fed for the duration of the program. Every day, feedyard staff ride through the pens on horseback to identify and segregate sick animals for treatment.

At this time, feedyard management and the state-wide coordinator begin to work on marketing and price protection strategies. Utilizing the Alabama estimated values and projected harvest dates, break-

even calculations are performed. Whenever a projected profit of \$8-10.00/cwt can be secured through a forward contract, the animals are contracted with one of the major packers. Cattle that cannot be contracted are hedged to provide protection against a falling market.

At processing, full carcass data collected on every animal. Each animal is also purchased based on a carcass merit grid, where premiums and discounts are assessed based on USDA Quality Grade, USDA Yield Grade, carcass weight, major quality defects, and premium branded programs.

After all animals are harvested in a group, all data from that group is summarized and payments are calculated back to the producer. Feed cost is assigned based on the pen feed efficiency multiplied by the gain of individual animals. All other costs and credits are assigned on an individual basis. Within 28 days of the final animals being harvested, consignors are paid and full data is returned.

After the first year of the program, producers were surveyed to gather information about how effective the program was in influencing decisions on the farm. Further surveying of 2017-2020 participants is planned for the future.

### **Teaching Methods**

Prior to consignment, each producer that is interested in the program is heavily engaged in one-on-one conversations with the state-wide coordinator of ALP2R. During these conversations, health programs, preconditioning nutritional management, and weaning protocols are discussed.

After cattle are consigned, participating producers receive updates after arrival at the feedyard describing the condition of the cattle, market conditions going forward, projected costs, and price protection options. Additionally, if there are health issues or death-loss throughout the feeding period, producers are notified.

After the cattle have been harvested, producers receive full individual growth, health, and carcass data. Most of these consignors engage in individual communication with the program coordinator about the data, and how that data can be used to improve their management at home. All producers are sent an individual evaluation of the performance of their cattle compared to the group they were fed with, the program averages, and national averages.

### **Results**

For this submission data from the 1,980 calves shipped then harvested from 2017 through 2020 is used. Below are some of the highlights of the data:

Carcass Data: 75.45% graded USDA Choice or Prime, 89.61% were Yield Grade 3 or lower, Hot Carcass Weights Averaged 854 lbs.

Performance Data: Calves averaged 173 days on feed, 1322 lbs. live weight prior to harvest, and gained 3.45 lbs. per day.

Health Data: 88.84% of calves were never treated for respiratory disease and 2.78% of calves had died prior to their harvest date.

More detailed data can be found in the attached documents titled "ACAAS Search for Excellence Additional Data Tables 2021"

## **Impact Statement**

Since 2016, ALP2R has gathered carcass, health, and performance data that would have otherwise been unattainable for Alabama cattlemen. In addition, the program has paid \$2,038,792.31 back to cattlemen for the 1980 cattle sent from Alabama that were harvested from 2017 through 2020, and added \$140,110.72 (\$70.76/head) in additional profit back to those operations. This has the potential to expand with the 1,111 calves shipped from May 2020 through January 2021.

## **Evaluation**

At the end of the 2019-2020 ALP2R year, producers were asked to complete an online Qualtrix survey on their knowledge gained, satisfaction with the program, and how they intend to use the data in the future. Eleven (11) producers completed these surveys. On a scale from 1 to 6 (6 being extremely satisfied), producers were asked to rank their satisfaction with the overall program (5.56), shipping protocols (5.67), data and summaries (5.78), and performance of their cattle (4.89). All of the completed surveys indicated that producers had increased their knowledge of retained ownership, that they would recommend the program to a friend or neighbor, and that the program met their expectations.