



JOURNAL OF NACAA

ISSN 2158-9459

VOLUME 18, ISSUE 2 – DECEMBER, 2025

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Guiding the Next Generation of Idaho Cattle Producers into the Future

Abstract

Since 2017, participants under the age of 40 have had the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge about the Idaho cattle industry. The Idaho Young Cattle Producers Conference (YCC) is the result of a desire of the beef cattle industry in Idaho to provide a conference for beginning cattle producers in Idaho. This conference is a partnership between the Idaho Cattle Association (ICA), the University of Idaho College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and University of Idaho Extension. The conference results from the efforts of a planning committee that is made up of representatives from the beef cattle industry, allied industry, and University of Idaho Extension. To date, more than 140 individuals from Idaho, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, and Washington have participated in the conference with 131 completing post-program evaluations. Results (5-point scale) of the evaluations show that program participants have a better understanding (4.4) of the various beef industry segments following their involvement in the program. Participants also have an above average likelihood (4.7) of utilizing information on current beef industry issues, an above average likelihood (4.6) of incorporating their newfound knowledge into their operation, and an above likelihood (4.4) of becoming involved in groups affiliated with the beef industry. Of those completing the evaluations, 100% said they would recommend the program to their peers. Future efforts will include updating the program to keep it relevant for participants

and offering alumni events to keep participants connected to one another and to the industry.

Introduction

Educational Objectives

In 2015, the University of Idaho College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) Administration gave the Animal and Veterinary Sciences (AVS) Department and the University of Idaho Extension Animal Science faculty a charge to develop a beef program of distinction. Listening sessions were hosted with beef cattle producers, allied industry representatives and other agribusiness individuals from across Idaho. One issue that was noted at each listening session was the need to educate young producers about all aspects of the beef industry. Additional comments highlighted the need to focus on issues affecting young producers' ability to enter the beef industry, how to be successful in the industry, and the importance of being involved in the industry. According to the 2022 USDA Agricultural Census, the average age of agricultural producers in Idaho was 56+ years with less than a quarter falling below 44 years of age. In 2022, there were 7,300+ beef operations in Idaho with cash receipts of more than \$2.8 billion (USDA-NASS, 2022). Based on the importance of the beef industry to Idaho's economy, the industry's aging workforce, and the support of agriculture/beef industry leaders, the Idaho Young Cattle Producers Conference (YCC) was initiated. The intent of the program is to expand participants' awareness of the beef cattle industry in Idaho. The program is designed to provide in-depth information on all sectors of the industry as well as create opportunities to network not only with each other but with established, successful producers and agriculture industry professionals. In addition to the knowledge gained and interactions, participants are also encouraged to consider additional ways to become involved from a beef industry advocacy and leadership perspective. This goal is potentially accomplished by the intentional timing of the annual program taking place in conjunction with the Idaho Cattle Association's (ICA) summer meeting, providing participants with exposure to the role that industry

organizations provide within the cattle industry. The three-day program is organized to balance presentations delivered by experienced and knowledgeable presenters and interactive components to encourage participation. Topics covered are directly applicable to the management of a beef cattle operation, regardless of location, size, or time established.

Program Activities

Beginning in January, the conference planning committee, with guidance from ICA, identifies the location where the conference will be hosted. Once the location is identified, the committee begins the process of identifying and securing speakers and tour stops and hosts. In March, YCC promotional materials are distributed to potential attendees through ICA, University of Idaho Extension mailing lists, and local cattle associations. An online application portal is launched for individuals to self-nominate or be nominated for the program. Sponsors, both new and established, are contacted and invited to continue supporting the program and given an invitation to attend the conference. At the end of May, applicants are presented to the planning committee, selected (based on age [18 to 40] and location of residence), and notified of their acceptance into the program. On an annual basis 20 participants are selected. Each year, the applicant pool has included employees of several of the program sponsors and members of several local cattle associations. During initial contact with selected applicants, their ability to travel to and participate in the conference is confirmed and details of the event (location, dates, times, expectations, etc.) are shared. Participants are then guided through the conference by members of the planning committee. At the completion of the conference, the planning committee evaluates programming successes and identifies opportunities for improvement based on the execution of the conference and feedback from participants, sponsors, and the planning committee.

Materials and Methods

The Idaho Young Cattle Producers Conference (YCC) lasts two full days, with a brief morning program on the third day that is followed by a brief graduation/recognition ceremony.

Program Outline

Day One – On the first day of the conference, participants receive insight into the cow-calf, seedstock/purebred, backgrounding, and feedlot sectors of the industry from industry speakers, before engaging with and hearing from a marketing panel. The marketing panel includes representatives from video sales, auction barns and cattle brokers, direct to feedyard buyers, and cull cattle buyers. Each marketing panelist spends time explaining their cattle procurement responsibilities, including what they look for in a set of cattle when considering making a purchase. Participants are then given time to ask questions to the entire panel and engage in further discussion. The first day concludes with participants attending the opening session of the ICA summer meeting which includes educational meetings and an association dinner where they can network with state and national cattle association staff, established owners/operators, and allied industry representatives.

Day Two - The second day of the conference begins with classroom time, where industry and Extension partners provide information on risk management (financial and operational). This includes speakers discussing financing of land, equipment, and cattle, marketing of cattle, and estate planning. The remainder of the second day is made up of the tour and a dinner at one of the tour stops. Tour stops include a feedlot and/or backgrounding operation, a beef processor, an operation implementing progressive and innovative practices, and a seedstock/purebred producer (Figures 1-3).



Figure 1. 2025 YCC participants toured a beef packing plant, True West Beef, in Jerome, Idaho.



Figure 2. 2024 YCC participants watched a meat cutting demonstration at Vandal Brand Meats in Moscow, Idaho.



Figure 3. 2022 YCC participants learned about ration formulation at a backgrounding yard in Blackfoot, Idaho

During dinner on the second evening, participants engage in group activities that encourage them to reflect on what they've learned thus far and identify areas where they would like to have more information. They are also given an opportunity to practice scenarios where they may be asked to advocate for the cattle industry when being questioned about various production practices.

Day Three - The conference wraps up on the third day with final presentations from ICA and various other groups (e.g., Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission, Idaho Farm Bureau, Idaho Beef Council, Public Lands Council). These group presentations are dependent on speaker's availability, location of the meeting within the state, and guidance from the planning committee. To round out the day, there is a hands-on activity on understanding and utilizing Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs). Following a brief conference evaluation, participants are then awarded a certificate of completion, and a class picture is taken.

Results

Since 2017, there have been nine installments of the Idaho YCC from which approximately 140 participants from Idaho, Oregon, Washington, Utah and Nevada between the ages of 18 and 40 have graduated. The conference is currently supported by twelve agricultural entities that provide approximately \$6000 in total on an annual basis. Delivery of information is provided by approximately 20 speakers and tour hosts.

Interest, participation, and support of the YCC program continues to remain successful. To ensure the program is relevant and remains successful into the future, the planning committee considers input from participants, speakers, and sponsors and pairs that with feedback from the evaluation administered to participants at the end of the conference. The post-program evaluation consists of 10 questions, which have been consistent throughout all years of the conference. The first five questions, included in Table 1, are designed to evaluate, in part, participants' understanding of the beef industry sectors and issues, their willingness to become engaged in the industry, and the value of the conference to them and/or their operations. Additional questions include: Rate the quality of speakers/information (1 = low quality; 5 = high quality).; Did you like how the conference was organized (no, reorganize; yes, with adjustments; yes, leave as is)?; Would you recommend this conference to others (yes; no)?; Were the tours interesting/enjoyable (yes; no)?; Was this a good time of year for the conference (yes; no)? A total of 131 evaluations have been completed since the YCC inception in 2017, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Average score of YCC post-program evaluation questions from 2017 to 2025.

Question	Average Rating (1 = not at all/not likely; 5 = a great deal/very likely)
How much better of an understanding do you have NOW of all segments of the beef industry?	4.4
How likely are you to utilize what you have learned about current issues facing young producers?	4.7
How likely are you to become more involved in groups affiliated with the beef industry?	4.4
How likely will what you have learned and experienced provide economic value to your operation?	4.7
How likely are you to put any of what you have learned to use in your operation?	4.6

It is hard to measure the specific impact the YCC program has had on the Idaho cattle industry. However, the impact the program has had on individual operations can be seen in the results (Table 1) of the post-program evaluations that have been conducted over the past 9 years. Participants have a better understanding of the various beef industry segments following their involvement in the program. Participants have an above average likelihood of utilizing information on current beef industry issues and an above average likelihood of incorporating their newfound knowledge into their operation. While specific numbers/amounts were neither requested nor offered, participants indicate the things they learned will provide economic value to their operations.

Additionally, YCC program participants are more likely to become involved in groups affiliated with the beef industry.

Of the 131 participants that have completed and submitted post-program evaluations, 100% indicated they would recommend the conference to their peers. Additionally, 100% of participants submitting evaluations indicated the tours were interesting and enjoyable with some sharing the following comments:

“Tours were very eye opening, being able to see all the different operations and steps.”

“Loved the tours! Thought information was great. I’m a visual, hands-on learner.”

When participants were asked to rate (1 = low quality; 5 = high quality) the quality of the speakers/information, the average rating was 4.7. Some of the participants’ comments related to the speakers and the information that was shared included:

“Great learning environment, enjoyed speakers and their knowledge of the industry.”

“Will use record keeping and financial information.”

“Enjoyed meat cutting demonstration. Would like more information on finances.”

Participants were asked to provide some input regarding the conference structure and timing. When asked if they liked how the conference was organized, 77.9% said yes and indicated the conference should be left as is. About twenty percent (19.9%) liked how the conference was organized but suggested some adjustments, and 2.2% chose not to answer the question. When participants were asked if this (summer) was a good time to hold the conference, 84.7% said yes, 12.2% said no, and 3.1% chose not to answer. Some specific comments about timing included:

“Hold conference in November or February, a farmer’s off-season.”

“Fall would be a good time of year for this.”

“It’s tough to find a good time of year, but those that are serious will come.”

“There is never a time of year we are not busy. It was worth taking the time off.”

Many of the comments provided by participants were more general in nature and provided some insights as to the value of the overall program and program structure. A few of those comments follow:

“Excellent, really enjoyed experience. Appreciated that ICA was at same time, made experience that much better.”

“Very impressed! The connections and education are top notch!”

“Liked being able to meet industry professionals.”

“Very interesting, learned a lot, especially about issues outside my area and how/where to go with issues that we may have.”

“Learned a lot and am motivated to be more involved.”

“It was a great experience! I would participate again.”

Discussion

The results collected from the YCC participants demonstrate an abundance of positivity and increased interest in the cattle industry by these young producers. Many of them indicated they planned to become more involved in their local cattle associations when they got back home. One goal of the YCC program is to increase the number of young cattle producers getting involved in the cattle industry at a higher level by serving on state, regional, and local boards. These boards are often tasked with providing information and guidance for legislation impacting rangelands, grazing, and livestock management, each of which are components of raising cattle in Idaho. Currently, there are former YCC participants serving the beef and agricultural industries in the following ways: two former participants as ICA board members, six as local cattle association board members, four as YCC planning committee members, and two as Idaho Farm

Bureau committee members. Even though this list may not be complete, it provides some indications that the YCC program has developed an interest among participants to give back to Idaho's beef and agricultural industries.

Other states have initiated beginning farmer and rancher programs, like Idaho's YCC program, confirming the need to target this audience. In 2011, University of Nevada, Reno Extension was awarded a USDA-NIFA Beginning Farmer Rancher Development grant (Emm et al., 2013), which led to the creation of the Herds & Harvest program. This program provides education focused on entrepreneurship, business and financial training, agriculture production basics, environmental compliance, diversification and marketing strategies, and mentoring. This program targeted an audience that consisted of not only beef cattle producers but also forage producers, producers of other livestock species, and small farms operators. The Herds & Harvest program has a broader scope, in terms of topics and audience, than the Idaho YCC program. In 2024, a 13-year evaluation of the Herds & Harvest program chronicled the evolution of the program from financial education workshops to a comprehensive certification course (Emm et al., 2024). In 2020 the organizers of this program, like many others, had to pivot from in-person classes to Zoom programming. While that was not the case with Idaho's YCC program, it does provide some insight into other avenues to potentially reach audiences. Herds & Harvest's hybrid program has been successful in meeting educational needs and creating comradery among cohorts. Another program focused on young producers and supported by allied industry is the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA) Young Stockmen's Academy (YSA). The KLA YSA program has a similar approach to Idaho YCC, with programming focused on all segments of the beef industry including purebred, cow-calf, backgrounding, dairy, feeding, processing, retail, food service, animal health, marketing, and finance (Kansas Livestock Association, 2025). The KLA YSA program takes place over the course of the calendar year with four sessions occurring in multiple locations throughout the state. Currently, Idaho's YCC program is held in conjunction with ICA's summer meeting. This one-time, one-location approach has worked well with Idaho's YCC speakers, contributors, and participants. This narrow and condensed approach has helped create a team of educators and industry leaders

focused on helping Idaho's young cattle producers succeed as well as recognize how to obtain more information and resources when needed.

In an effort to keep the Idaho YCC program relevant and of value to young producers, a new program evaluation tool is being developed. The evaluation will provide an opportunity to better capture the successes and impacts of the program, identify needs of potential participants, and capture return on investment figures. While attendance in the program has been good, there is a desire to reach greater numbers of potential young producers. Currently, mailing lists, email distribution lists, and social media streams are being updated along with exploring new avenues to spread the word about the program. In the future, the Idaho YCC team hopes to incorporate alumni events at the ICA annual meetings, which are held each November. This would encourage younger audiences of cattle producers to attend these important industry networking events, learn from one another, and create life-long ties.

Conclusions

The Idaho YCC program has been a success due to the ties it has with the ICA summer meeting. The program has now become a part of the summer meeting that many industry members and long-time cattle producers look forward to being a part of. The YCC program gives these individuals an opportunity to get to know the young producers, share their experiences and knowledge with them, and create networks of individuals that can come together to address industry issues. Allied industry representatives have been very supportive of the program offering resources, access to speakers and information, and channels to advertise the program. Many of the participants feel strongly about the YCC program and recommend it to their peers, which increases the reputation and reach of the program.

Acknowledgements

The planning committee would like to acknowledge the partnership between YCC and ICA staff and board members for their continuing support of the program. They would also like to thank the many sponsors over the years that have kept the program running free of cost to the participants.

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