

A 'sweet spot' for raising heifers

Colorado custom grower capitalizes on climate, feed to raise animals for embryo transfer

By Stacey Smart
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FORT MORGAN, Colo. — In the eastern plains of Colorado, heifers at CK2 Cattle Company come in as calves and leave as pregnant heifers. Raised on western weather and feed, these heifers come home ready for a productive life.

"All the things that you need to grow a good heifer, we have right here in Colorado," said Kirk Crone, one of the farm's owners. "We're in that sweet spot for heifer raising."

Located one hour north-east of Denver near Fort Morgan, CK2 Cattle Company is home to 4,200 head housed on dry lots. The herd is 90% registered Holsteins and 10% crossbreds. All cattle come from two clients in Wisconsin and New York. Heifers arrive between 3-5 months of age and are sent home at 220-240 days pregnant. Every month, the farm receives 250-300 calves and ships out 120 bred heifers.

"We are small from a numbers standpoint and offer that personal touch, caring for animals on an individual basis," Crone said. "We maintain

close relationships with our customers instead of treating them as another number in the lot. Communication is a priority, and we strive to continue that philosophy as we continue to grow with our current and future customers."

The area's dry conditions create an environment where heifers thrive, Crone said.

"We have the perfect climate for raising heifers," he said. "Summers are typically drier than most places around us, but we still have enough moisture to produce good crops. It's dry enough on the lots that we very seldom have a problem with moisture to where we have to mitigate foot rot."

Heifers are housed on dirt and in pens large enough to give them the chance to exercise.

"Exercise makes them healthier and allows them to build a better rumen," Crone said.

Milk production is on the rise for this grower's clients. Crone credits the increased



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Part of the CK2 Cattle Company team — Hector (from left), Jose, Jorge, Michael Rea, embryologist; Cari Vondy, manager; Kirk Crone, owner; Jesus and Rafa — gathers April 16 near Fort Morgan, Colorado. CK2 Cattle Company, a custom heifer growing operation, was started by Crone, Travis Kroskob and Brandon Kroskob in 2021 and is home to 4,200 heifers.

production to the exercise heifers receive along with a robust diet.

"Whether raising heifers at home or sending them out here, it's not cheap," Crone said. "But, our clients are seeing such better production results from heifers starting off. It's enough of an increase to

offset the cost of sending them here. In some cases, they're coming out ahead."

CK2 Cattle Company was started by Crone, Travis Kroskob and Brandon Kroskob in 2021. Each partner farms his own land and operates a custom forage business. Facing ups and downs in feed inven-

tory due to fluctuations in customer demand, the three men were sometimes left with more feed than they could use or sell, so they brainstormed options for consuming what they were producing.

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"We were passing a lot of feed through our hands and wanted to be the end user of that feed," Crone said. "We were looking to do something that would be more sustainable year to year, and we wanted to do something in the dairy world. This helps ensure that we have a home for all the feed running through our custom operations now."

With three years of custom heifer raising, this business is riding a path of growth and productivity. Crone and the Kroskob brothers manage the operation with help from a team of eight employees.

"We're surrounded by the right people, which has helped us succeed," Crone said. "It's been a team effort. We've partnered with the right customers and the right team, and it's all working very well."

Manager Cari Vondy is a major part of the team, Crone said. Vondy is in charge of employees as well as day-to-day operations.

"Cari has been with us since almost the beginning and instrumental in getting things off the ground," Crone said. "Most days, she is right in the mix with the rest of the guys. She knows the ins and outs of all that's going on within the operation and plays a key role in the success of everything that takes place."

Crone said what sets CK2 Cattle Company apart from other growers is their use of embryo transfer.

"Most grower yards in Colorado are all A.I.," Crone said. "We are 95% embryo and 5% A.I. That's what our expertise is."

Heifers are bred at 13 months of age. The client ships fresh or frozen embryos of their choosing to CK2 Cat-

tle Company for implanting.

"We also use a lab an hour from here for our flushing program," Crone said. "In the future, we have plans of having our own lab on-site, allowing us to flush here. Our conception rates have been very good, and this will improve our conception rates even more. Our embryologist and veterinarian are top-notch."

Offering these services will benefit the growth Crone sees on the horizon.

"When we first started, our embryologist was transferring once every other week," he said. "Now, he transfers 4-5 times a week. Eventually, he and his team will be transferring 6-7 days a week as we continue to grow."

In addition to providing a genetic advantage through embryo transfer, CK2 Cattle Company also feeds a high-quality diet. Heifers receive a total mixed ration containing corn silage, alfalfa haylage, chopped triticale, wet distillers grain, alfalfa, baled oats and peas.

"We'll also throw in other forages we can get our hands on, and we grind a lot of wheat straw and cornstalk too," Crone said. "Our nutritionist is phenomenal and another major asset to our team. We couldn't do this without him."

The operation mixes about five rations, which vary by the age of the group.

"We have a very good selection of roughages and are able to put up drier feed," Crone said. "Our rations are a lot drier than Midwest rations. We're in the 40s (percentage) for dry matter. The drier triticale and oats we mix in for scratch is helping to build production in heifers later in life."

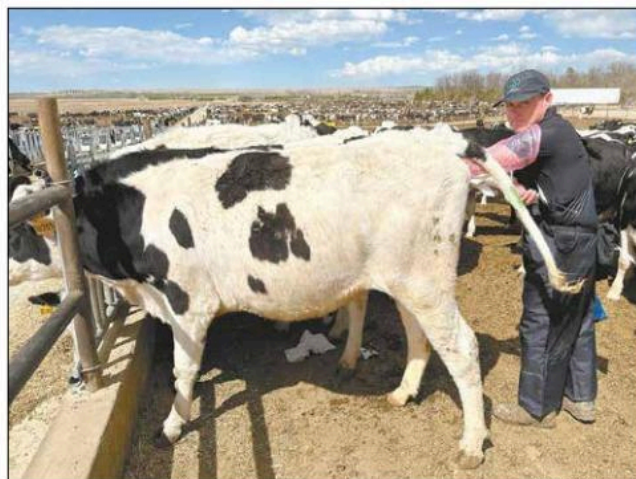


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Embryologist Michael Rea transfers embryos April 15 at CK2 Cattle Company near Fort Morgan, Colorado. At this custom operation, 95% of the heifers are bred using embryo transfer.

The average daily gain per heifer is around 2 pounds.

"Our goal is to get heifers to 850-900 pounds before we put an embryo into them," Crone said.

They follow the vaccine protocols provided by each of their clients, and Crone said the farm's mortality rate is near zero.

"We're getting healthy calves to start with, and that makes all the difference in the world," Crone said. "We're kind of picky about the clients we take on. Health of the animal is No. 1. Our

clients are extremely good about giving us healthy cattle, and we return a healthy animal to them."

CK2 Cattle Company is focused on efficiency and growing their team before growing their lot, Crone said. He predicts the farm will house over 20,000 head in the future.

"We will continue to grow until it's no longer efficient to keep growing," Crone said. "The benefits our clients are getting here are helping them out big time."

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