

Raising Excellence: A roundup of livestock issues and exhibits

By Lydia Hill

From cattle to sheep, and everything in between, the livestock exhibits at the Sunbelt Ag Expo showcase the best of Southeastern agriculture. Each year, Expo visitors gather to learn through hands-on demonstrations, expert presentations, and interactive displays that highlight the vital role livestock plays in the region's farms and farm families. Whether you are a seasoned cattleman or simply curious about animal agriculture, the Expo's livestock demos provide an inside look at the industry.

Stocking up on Stockmanship

The future is bright for the beef cattle industry in the Southeast. Beef cattle rank as the fifth-largest commodity in Georgia, with an inventory of 455,000 head. To ensure the safety of all these animals and the health of the industry, Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) practices are encouraged for all operations.

Record-keeping, animal health protocols, and nutrition are all aspects of BQA, but arguably the most significant factor is animal handling. This year, Expo attendees will have the privilege to learn from one of the nation's most respected cattle handlers. Curt Pate contracts with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) to teach stockmanship.

Pate teaches practical, low-stress techniques in his seminars that not only keep animals calm but also improve safety and teamwork, making operations more efficient. He has dedicated his career to improving livestock handling nationwide through these stockmanship and stewardship programs.

"As we learn, teach, and change cultures, people are getting better and better about handling cattle," said Pate. "Not that they didn't ever handle them well, but we can learn to handle them in a way that maybe everyone can, and there's no danger of injury, and the weight gains are better."

You can see Pate in action at the Beef Pavilion this year, showcasing a cattle handling demonstration. For producers seeking to become BQA certified, this is the place to be. You can also find stockmanship and stewardship information at the Neogen booth, as they are NCBA's national sponsor for the program.

Robo-Poultry

Even though poultry, especially broilers, is Georgia's leading agricultural product, there's always room for innovation and progress. Avian influenza is a common topic in everyday talks about Georgia poultry, but much more is happening behind the scenes.

Robotics has recently been introduced in broiler houses, and Claudia Dunkley has been working with her colleagues and researchers to implement the technology. One of the innovations can specifically lift the laying hens off the ground, which allows eggs to be left on the ground and collected by hand. Littered floors can be challenging to manage due to moisture issues, the risk of harboring pathogens, and the labor-intensive cleaning required.

The robot that moves birds into the air helps workers keep a clean house and follow biosecurity rules, while also allowing the birds to act on their instinct to roost. Time off the litter floor reduces injury, improves air quality, and lowers stress caused by crowding.

Dairy Tales

Dairy cattle have become a prominent topic in the livestock industry, not just because of the active and innovative efforts producers put in every day, but also because dairy operations have recently been focusing on telling the positive and educational story of agriculture.

Dairy farms can safely provide agritourism and educate the public about the milk-making process, while also highlighting the positive aspects of the food animal industry. Through farms open to visitors, producers can directly inform consumers about the challenges they face daily.

Dr. Jillian Bohlen is an Associate Professor of Animal and Dairy Science at the University of Georgia. Because she divides her time between teaching and extension activities, her main role is to engage young people in agriculture, helping them gain knowledge about the industry even if they don't pursue a career in it.

“I think the dairy industry is putting a really positive light, rightfully so, on our food animal producing industries as a whole,” said Bohlen.

Equine Athletes

This year's headline Equine Technician is Abby Kampmann from Toga, Texas, who has spent the last 13 years with the National Reining Horse Association learning various programs from industry professionals. She has developed her own techniques to produce high-quality equine athletes who understand the fundamentals of western performance horses. [AM1]

Kampmann will be holding live demos in the Priefert Arena along with Garret Shanks, a young professional from Valdosta, Georgia. The Sunbelt Toucet Goat Roping Productions will also be holding the 2nd Annual Sunbelt Goat Roping. All visitors will be able to attend and enter to potentially win a custom belt buckle.

Raising Ruminants

In the Southeast, raising sheep and goats is less common than other livestock, but production is increasing. Many producers find that small ruminants work well with cattle and on small-acreage farms. Farm-to-table marketing, which has become popular recently, also helps small-scale farmers increase profitability in sheep and goat production.

There is growing interest in ethnic and specialty meats, especially among Middle Eastern, African, Hispanic, and Caribbean communities, many of whom prefer lamb and goat meat. There is also grown interest among health-focused consumers in growing and managing their own food, including meats. For those new to livestock management, these small ruminants may appear less intimidating than larger options.[AM2]

Smells Like Money: Manure Management in the Livestock Industry

In today's agricultural world, sustainability and cost-effectiveness are more crucial than ever. One modest byproduct is staking claim as a powerful resource: manure. Once seen as merely a foul nuisance by outsiders, livestock waste is now recognized for its economic benefits, environmental contributions, and role in circular farming systems. From beef ranches to poultry farms, manure management is improving, and the entire industry is benefiting from these developments.

Manure management and economic viability are closely linked. Converting what some consider waste into a valuable resource benefits both farmers and the environment. Manure is a natural fertilizer rich in nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK), which are essential nutrients for plant growth. By opting for manure over synthetic fertilizers, farmers can significantly cut input costs.

Before modern methods were introduced, farmers' best options were to either leave manure where it was or shovel it into large piles in designated barns. Then they would spread it directly on their land. This traditional approach can still be effective, but research has also shown that manure can be utilized in other ways.

Each type of animal agriculture has different methods to ensure that the waste produced by their animals is economically advantageous.

The poultry industry takes proactive steps to ensure that large quantities of litter are used in the most cost-effective way possible. Chicken farmers follow carefully outlined protocols, but manure is the one resource they have control over.

Claudia Dunkley is an extension poultry specialist and scientist at the University of Georgia. She assists both large and small flock producers in improving their operations. Her primary focus is on commercial egg production and environmental concerns.

"The only thing they can move is the manure, and even with that, they still have to abide by what the company wants," said Dunkley. "You can't have a producer move manure off his farm and take it to another farm."

While biosecurity measures are still in place for litter, farmers now have more options to transform waste into a nutrient-rich material.

Poultry manure, especially from broilers and layers, is nutrient-dense and dry, making it ideal for composting or pelletizing into organic fertilizer products. Litter is often reused across multiple flocks

before being removed and sold or applied to fields. Due to its high phosphorus content, careful management is necessary to prevent runoff and nutrient imbalances.

Likewise, dairy farms produce large amounts of both solid and liquid manure. Many operations use flush or scrape systems to collect manure into lagoons or pits. Liquid manure is either applied through irrigation systems or injected into the soil. Sand separation systems also enable the reuse of bedding materials, thereby reducing costs.

Methane digesters are devices mainly used in the dairy cattle industry. Their purpose is to quickly break down cow manure and capture methane along with other gases. Then, the lack of oxygen in the sealed tank causes anaerobic digestion, which transforms harmful gases into renewable biogas that can be used as fuel or for generating heat and electricity. In Georgia, the first digester was installed on Adam Graft's farm in 2022.

Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) strategies are used in beef cattle operations to guide producers on best management practices for their animals. Micheala Clowser is the Senior Director of Producer Education at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. Her role involves creating workshops for events like the Sunbelt, where she teaches cattle producers effective methods for handling their cattle.

"When it comes to manure management, specifically talking from the BQA perspective, it's a key part of responsible cattle production," said Clowser. "We emphasize practices that reduce runoff, improve nutrient cycling, protect water quality, especially in those confined or winter-feeding areas".

Manure management has significantly improved from the days of simple shovels and piles. As agriculture moves toward a more sustainable and resource-efficient future, livestock producers across all sectors are seeing that this natural byproduct can be a valuable resource. So, the next time you hear the word "manure," think beyond the smell and imagine its potential.

The livestock industry in the Southeast has a bright future. From robots to educational farm tours and animal handling seminars, there is a lot to look forward to this year at the Expo. To learn more about each aspect of the livestock industry, please check the Event Show Schedule for seminars, demonstrations, and other events that interest you.