The annual interdisciplinary beef cattle symposium at the American Society of Animal Science Southern Section annual meeting has been a well-attended addition to the program at the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists (SAAS) annual conference. This venue allows broad participation by all attendees from the Southern Section of American Society of Animal Science (ASAS), and the symposium is also well attended by members of other societies associated with SAAS. The symposium in 2012, which was held in Birmingham, AL, on February 6, was developed to address economic and production management issues for modern stocker cattle production systems. Beef cattle production in the southern United States is driven by fluctuations in multiple commodity markets, seasonality, weather patterns, production management capabilities, and many other factors. Taking advantage of the opportunities these fluctuations present can be a key component of profitability.

The average age of cattle producers in the United States is 58 yr (USDA-NASS, 2007), indicating a reduction in young producers choosing this field as a career. Stocker cattle production might provide an ideal entry into the industry. Cash flow can be more ideally managed for a beginning producer that might lack the financial and resource capital for cow–calf production. However, financial and production risk management can be more intense. Moreover, health, production, and pasture management require a great deal of experiential knowledge compared with cow–calf production systems.

The nomenclature around stocker cattle production can be confusing and regional jargon varies widely. In general, the term “stocker” refers to a weaned calf grown predominantly on standing forage with or without supplementation (Johnson et al., 2010). “Backgrounding” refers to growing weaned calves with a high concentrate ration, often in drylot housing. The term “feeder calf” is usually intended to describe weaned steers and heifers that are going straight to a feedlot without going through a stockering or backgrounding system.

The stocker cattle industry in the Southern United States is based on several different scenarios: 1) purchasing mismanaged cattle, improving their health and appearance, and then selling them to feeders as a value-added product, 2) purchasing high-quality calves as small groups or singles, commingling them into uniform lots, and profiting from improved marketing power, or 3) adding BW on forages or byproducts at a lower cost than could be done in the feedlot. A classic model has been to purchase intact males, castrate them, and then resell them after they have healed and gained BW. As group size began to have a larger effect on the cost of marketing cattle, a component of assembling larger lots was added to the stockering and backgrounding scenario. Adding BW on grass has always been a component of stockering systems, but the value of that added BW fluctuates with the cost of BW gain on grass versus the cost of BW gain in the feedlots. When feedlot cost of BW gain increases beyond break-even for the projected value of BW gain, feeders tend to place heavier cattle. That situation encourages initial placement of stocker programs where those pounds are added on forage-based diets.