

Accountability On the Rise

Embracing change for cattle care, drug use means opportunity for profit in cattle feeding.

by **Steve Suther**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Antibiotic use hits cattle feeders as a cost, but a less direct system of accounting may affect treatment decisions going forward.

Robin Falkner, Zoetis technical services veterinarian, explored that concept at the Feeding Quality Forums (FQF) this summer in Grand Island, Neb., and Amarillo, Texas. He called attention to Wal-Mart's 2015 notice that it will require sustainable transparency from its meat suppliers, with public reporting on animal welfare and antibiotic use.

"Nobody knows exactly what this will look like yet," Falkner said. Reporting would likely not involve "publishing it in a newspaper, but you'd put it out there for everybody to see, and I think that makes us all a little uncomfortable."

In most beef system audits, he said, "we look at the process, the facility, and we generally pass, but this would evaluate outcomes," he said. "They seem to be saying they'll count the number you had to treat. It's not something that should scare us, but it's definitely something that could be used against us if we don't get our head right."

Until a system takes shape, speculation reigns.

"How would we count antibiotics or welfare — milligrams, grams, days? Is one class going to count the same as another? A

long-acting antibiotic can provide 10 days of therapy at 110 milligrams per hundredweight (cwt.), but chlortetracycline (CTC) in the feed for 10 days would take 91 times the milligram dose," Falkner said.

"If a daily ration includes Tylosin, would that be 167 doses per head on 167-day cattle? Can you imagine how that would look to a consumer? I've heard these questions, and we need to be part of the conversation."

In a business model weighing inputs and outputs, he noted, high-risk cattle have often been profitable despite higher health-associated costs and antibiotic use.

"Now, we may want to reconsider the role of procurement management with the interaction of antibiotic use and animal welfare," he said. "We need to find ways to get better results that rely less on antibiotics and within what we can control. That's good business."

Risk for bovine respiratory disease includes pre- and postweaning factors,

Falkner said. Cattle feeders may say they are victims of risk created by others, "but you're going to have to take responsibility from the time you own him, too."

That starts from the placement of an order and includes handling prior to arrival. Cow-calf responsibility extends to preparing cattle for the next phase, and marketing that minimizes stress, disease and antibiotic use, he said.

Cooperative relationships with the ranch, auction, buyer and trucker can help feeders establish better ratings with packers that may have to meet audit goals on welfare and antibiotics for a large customer such as Wal-Mart, he added.

"We need to find win-win solutions that create shared value in cattle," Falkner said.

"The packer buyer already has a priority list that starts with the guy he calls when he only needs one load. There's a guy who's number 99 and never gets a call, but you move up and down that list," he said. When a packer knows he's being compared to other suppliers, he will benchmark cattle feeders.

Based on the German system in place since 2013, every supplier in the top half for antibiotic use must have a plan to lower it next year.

"With the top 25%, they're holding your hand and you're under a lot of scrutiny," Falkner said. "Everybody's benchmarking everybody, and all have the incentive to look good in this kind of accounting."

As such systems develop in the United States, they may affect market access before starting to pay premiums. Any of those would be "highly seasonal," because big ranches in the North and West can supply healthy calves that finish from May to August.

The rest of the year draws on small herds located far from feedyards. That can present as much opportunity as challenge for Southern feeders, "but we need to get our head around it and watch what we communicate to the crew," Falkner said. "If we have a pen dead, we're fussing at people and wanting to know how and why it happened. It's like we want to make sure none die that were not pulled for treatment, and the easiest way to do that is to treat a lot more of them earlier."

That's a recipe for trouble already, and will cause more if feedyards are rated by the level of antibiotic use, he said.

"In the past, we've encouraged early and deep pulls, which welfare and antibiotic use



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► "Now is the time to explore managing to both lower antimicrobial use and better health outcomes," says Robin Falkner.



► Approximately 200 attendees participated in the two Feeding Quality Forums co-sponsored this fall in Grand Island, Neb., and Amarillo, Texas, by Micronutrients, *Feedlot* magazine, Zoetis, Roto-mix and Certified Angus Beef LLC.

metrics will penalize, but I've become convinced that early and aggressive treatment doesn't work anyway," Falkner said.

Studies of cattle deaths in their first weeks on feed show antibiotics that could have helped were administered too soon, leaving no effective alternatives later.

The first treatment is often 10%-15% more effective than the second, so giving the best shot to all calves automatically reduces success on "retreats" that are really "mistreats," he said.

Instead of fostering a "doctoring" job description where more is better, the veterinarian suggests praising pen riders for producing groups with fewer pulls.

"Ask them to just go to the back of the pen for the first five days and send text messages or watch YouTube till the first cattle come off feed. Then push the tail ends up there. Get them all on feed quickly and comfortable

with a person as a friend and not a predator," Falkner said. "Pulls will go down drastically because the job just became about creating, identifying and not treating well animals."

Pen size is another factor in enhancing welfare, he said, noting it takes co-infection from several organisms to trigger a BRD outbreak. Modeling shows commingled calves in a 62-head pen are 86% less likely to encounter co-infection from two problem pathogens than those in a 250-head pen.

"Society will accept antimicrobial use that results in better outcomes," Falkner said.

The benchmarking scenario could add value to load lots from fall-calving herds.

"If I can produce finished animals from late fall to spring with low antibiotic use and welfare metrics, there's going to be value in those cattle and to my packer relationship," he said. "A modest-size feedlot with good

procurement and husbandry may be more competitive with those that have better grain basis or efficiencies of scale."

As always, those who anticipate and own the coming changes will fare better than "those who chose to be victims of change," Falkner said. "Now is the time to explore managing to both lower antimicrobial use and better health outcomes."

The forums, hosted in Grand Island, Neb., and Amarillo, Texas, were co-sponsored by Micronutrients, *Feedlot* magazine, Zoetis, Roto-mix and Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). To view presentations and summary information, visit www.feedingqualityforum.com.



Editor's Note: *Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*