

Lessons in Feeding

Panelists share 10 lessons learned from feeding cattle.

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

Four men with different roles in cattle feeding joined panel moderator Justin Sexten at the Angus Means Business National Convention & Trade Show in exploring the top 10 things they learned from feeding cattle. The session was part of the 21st Century Cattle Production block of Angus University, which was sponsored by Merck Animal Health.

Sexten and panelist Paul Dykstra represented the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand and took the stage with Arkansas cattleman Jim Moore, Kansas feeder Shane Tiffany and Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) Manager Darrell Busby.

The 10 lessons came up in random order as panelists took turns making their points to the audience.

1. Analyze the data to make a better calf every year

Moore, of Charleston, Ark., said he began

retaining ownership 20 years ago to make genetic investments pay, but the pressure is greater now. Noting he paid \$2,900 for an Angus bull in 2010 but more than twice that in 2015, he asked, “Why pay \$6,700 for a bull if you’re only going to own his calves for seven months?”

In the early 1990s, genetics were already good enough to attract repeat buyers, Moore said, “but they just paid an average price.”

The first feedlot shared pen data, but he said the lights really came on when he switched to a feedyard that sold on a grid.

“Within two years, I learned more than I had in the previous 20 years,” he said. “We

went through the individual carcass data with a fine-tooth comb to find our tops and bottoms for culling criteria and to see genetic needs.

“It was like I used to tell kids when I coached baseball: ‘Don’t just play the game — become a student of the game.’ Analyze

the data. Make a better calf every year,” Moore implored.

2. Feedlots, cow-calf producers are partners

Tiffany, a partner with his brother Shawn in Tiffany Cattle Co., Herington, Kan., noted feedlots are natural partners with cow-calf producers: “We’re not your enemy.”

Recognizing Moore’s motives in many who decide to finish calves, Tiffany addressed the next step of finding a feedlot “to trust with your life’s work, a big investment.” Granted, there are differences in feedlots, he said, and many producers have had bad experiences.

“So get customer references, go visit some yards, meet the managers and get a high level of comfortability with them, because it’s a huge decision aimed at building a mutually beneficial relationship to get the most out of your calves,” Tiffany said.

Some people look at the cost of gain, rations and the like, but dig deeper, he suggested. “We all use the same nutritionists — what you have to decide is, do you trust the guy?”



▶ Panelists (from left) Shane Tiffany, Jim Moore, Darrell Busby and Paul Dykstra joined moderator Justin Sexten to share lessons learned feeding cattle. Following the presentation, *The Angus Report* interviewed Sexten for his take on the advantages retained ownership provides in learning more about the cattle you produce. Watch the segment by turning your web browser to <http://bit.ly/1PVwBAP>. Digital readers can click the photo above.

PHOTO BY LEANN SCHLEICHER, ANGUS MEDIA

3. Disposition is not a convenience trait

Disposition is not a convenience trait, Busby emphasized. Other than avoiding the danger posed by wild cattle, the career extension beef specialist said economics also favor docility.

Only an objective measure such as the Beef Improvement Federation's chute exit speed scoring can provide useful data, he said. "Self-evaluation does not work well."

That's why thousands of calves fed in the Futurity are scored two or more times for disposition. Analysis on accumulated data showed wild cattle were treated less, but had twice the death loss. Always alert when pen riders come by, nervous ones are easy to miss and hard to pull.

"If you have 100 heifers to work, the best plan is to track disposition by dam, but as a general rule, some of the wildest ones will be first and last," Busby said.

4. How average their cattle are

First-time feeders are often surprised at how "average" their cattle are, Dykstra said.

"But the average keeps moving up," he reminded the audience. "Today, 80% Choice is barely above average."

Tiffany added that, in fact, 86% Choice was this year's average at their 15,000-head yard.

A dozen years ago, feedlot managers said Angus don't perform at an average level, Dykstra said. "We need to expect more from Angus, but we need to do more than expect — we need to have a plan."

Trait selection must be balanced, but producers should still prioritize.

"We need to trim off the left-hand side of the bell curve, the low outliers, more often," he said.

5. One source doesn't guarantee health

Single-source calves do not guarantee health, Busby said.

"We have data on 97,000 calves over 15 years, and these are mostly from small producers," he explained, "where 55% of them don't have enough to fill a pen."

In such commingled pens, respiratory disease vaccination using a modified-live virus (MLV) vaccine clearly beats using "killed" vaccines, Busby said. For

best results, talk to your cattle feeder and veterinarian to develop an effective health plan, he advised.

6. Wean them for 30 days or not at all

"If you can't wean them at least 30 days, don't wean calves at all before sending them to the feedlot," Busby said. Tiffany agreed.

Working with hundreds of producers across half the country and even some in Canada has shown some producers cut corners and just get close to 30 days, the listed TCSCF requirement.

"One pen that had at least as much problem as unweaned [calves] had been weaned 23 days, just a week short of 30," Busby noted. Although TCSCF data doesn't provide a good read on any advantage for the industry standard 45-day weaning, the futurity manager joked that it would certainly be a better target for those inclined to cut a week off that span.

7. Cows adapted to the ranch can produce calves adapted to the feedlot

Ranch-adapted cows can result in feedlot-adapted calves, Moore said.

"A bull contributes 50% of the genetics to each calf, but we feel the cow is a lot more than half of the key to success," he said.

Maternal traits were the primary focus, along with strategic culling based on harvest reports.

"We're not breeding for carcass quality, really," Moore said. "It's just happened. People used to say 'carcass cattle' are hard-doing, but they're not."

He said a 2004 closeout found when cleaning out a desk showed 46% Choice, compared to last year's 99% Choice and 85% CAB and Prime (27%).

Moore narrowed his replacement heifer picks using GeneMax® Focus™ four years ago. Among the first 17 calves from them were nine Prime and eight other CAB carcasses.

"They're all moderate-frame and easy-doing," he added. "We calve 250 in the fall and had 200 born the first 30 days."

8. Problems at the ranch are problems at the feedyard

Challenges at the ranch are challenges at the feedyard, Tiffany said.

"Sickness is the main concern. We need

good communications both ways," he said. "We all have to be trustworthy to make a relationship work."

He suggested it's better to share too much than hold anything back.

"It's happened too often that we'll call and mention the ranch tag on a sick calf and hear they had to doctor him twice," Tiffany said. "Sometimes a customer will ask about a calf like that, and I say please leave him home, because he'll be a bigger problem here."

9. Start collecting data at the ranch

Carcass data collection starts at the ranch, Tiffany pointed out, speaking of tags.

"You would be shocked at the number of guys who have wanted individual data, but had no tags in their calves," he said.

Group data is still possible without tags, but "if you want to improve the herd, you really need to look at both the mama and the daddy," Tiffany said. "We'll never remove your ranch tags."

10. Begin by calculating a breakeven

Feeding cattle should begin with a breakeven calculation, Dykstra said.

"Some people don't check to see if they made money until the cattle are harvested, but you can get a better handle on risk and management if you do that at the start," he said, noting it can be fun to run the numbers.

"It's good practice to calculate breakevens, and you really ought to know the dollar implications before you commit to feeding," Dykstra added.

The panel made its presentation during Angus University's educational block focused on 21st Century Cattle Production. Merck Animal Health sponsored the educational series. To listen to the presentation, visit the convention Newsroom at <http://angusjournal.com/NCnTS/2015/index.html>.



Editor's Note: Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC. This article is part of the online coverage of the Angus Means Business National Convention & Trade Show provided by Angus Media. Visit the convention Newsroom available at <http://angusjournal.com/NCnTS/2015/index.html> to access additional summaries, PowerPoint presentations and the audio of the sessions.

You can listen to this panel presentation at <http://bit.ly/106t53i>.