

Feed to Lead



Texas Angus Association directors learn, demonstrate through steer feeding project.

Story & photos by **Larry Stalcup**

With more than \$25 million per year in grid premiums paid to producers hitting the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand target, Angus leaders in the Lone Star State want more of those dollars to land deep in the heart of Texas.

Several members of the Texas Angus Association (TAA) Board of Directors pooled their cattle and fed them at a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot in 2008.

They agree that was just the start; more pooling is expected this year and beyond by those and other TAA members.

Their aim was to lead by example. The Board wanted to demonstrate ways to learn how cattle perform at the feedyard and packer levels, bypassing traditional buyers and placing them on feed.

Six ranchers commingled 50 calves and sent them to CAB partner Keeling Cattle Feeders Inc. near Hereford, Texas, last February. Calves ranged from 600 pounds (lb.) to more than 800 lb., and finished between July and September. They graded mostly USDA Choice, but the varying weights kept them from the consistency that

everyone hoped for, says Robbie Bean, a TAA director from Sulphur Springs, Texas.

"We learned it takes work to make sure there is uniformity of cattle," he says. "The difference in their weights meant all the cattle couldn't be marketed near the same time."

Three goals, one project

The demonstration met three major goals.

"We wanted to provide our seedstock producers with an outlet for those sale animals that were not breeding-stock quality," Bean says. "Second, by removing those animals from the pool of bulls up for sale, we increased the value of breeding stock we're

selling. And third, we wanted to educate our [TAA] members on how the feeding process works so they can better inform their bull customers on the options available."

Steve Knoll, a TAA director who ranches with his wife, Laura, near Hereford, Texas, fed calves as part of the group. "With this type of program, you can experience what your customers experience when they feed

calves from bulls they've bought from you," he says.

"By receiving carcass data from the packer, you can find out how your cattle perform in all kinds of conditions. You may find some calves you culled and sold didn't need to be culled," Knoll says. "Basically, you'll learn whether your calves will do what you want them to do."

Producers are often surprised at how their calves perform off the ranch, says feedyard owner Scott Keeling.

"Information is power," he says. "It gives them the knowledge to help improve what they're doing."

Gary Fike, beef cattle specialist for CAB, says steer futurities like the TAA venture are often the best way for cattlemen to learn what they're ultimately producing for consumers.

"Feeding even a few head of cattle takes a certain amount of financial risk, but it opens the door for information flow," Fike says. "A futurity shows producers where improvements are needed, just like any other production testing model.

"Not only does it give them an idea concerning the end product, it will tell them how well the cattle gain and convert feed,"



► **Above:** Several directors of the Texas Angus Association pooled their cattle and fed them at a CAB-licensed feedlot in 2008.

he says. "If they gain 2.8 lb. per day when similar cattle are gaining 3.2 lb., they need to ask themselves, 'Why?' If the cattle only grade 35% Choice and 65% Select and Standard, they again need to ask, 'Why?'"

Producers will have to be receptive to new ideas, including teaming up with those around them, Bean says.

"They should find ways to commingle like types of cattle in numbers significant enough that feedyards will take them," he says. "It can be with their neighbors, others from our association or from regional groups."

He encourages producers unfamiliar with the finishing process to take it slow.

"With a program like the one we started at TAA, they can learn the ins and outs of feeding cattle," Bean says. "It will help you decide whether you're going to feed cattle and if it fits your particular program."

Assistance available

CAB staff can guide producers through a feeding program.

"We can line them up with licensed feedlots that will do a good job of feeding their cattle and getting the carcass data," Fike says. "Once the results are back, we can also pinpoint areas that need to be targeted, such as growth and performance, as well as carcass merit in the areas of marbling, fat thickness, ribeye area, yield and quality grade."

A close look at the data can show how all the pieces of selection and management fit together.

"We take a whole-system approach," Fike says. "We would not just look at marbling, but at all other EPDs (expected progeny differences) and characteristics that affect the overall picture."

As part of selecting a feedyard, producers should become familiar with the people in charge, and make sure they provide all the needed services.

"Does the yard offer shared ownership, such as a 50/50 arrangement on the cattle?" Fike asks. "Will the feedlot finance the feed? How does their cost of corn compare with others and how do they expect that to vary while your cattle are on feed? What has been the overall cost of gain on similar cattle?"

Real-world advantages

In most cases, the cow-calf producer should defer to the feedlot's expertise in marketing finished cattle, but shouldn't pass up opportunities to learn. Look for a feedlot that will explain the marketing options and logic for selling live, on a carcass basis or value-based grid, he says.

Assistance with risk management and the cost of getting carcass data are two other important areas to discuss, along with information needs to benefit from possible

source- and age-verification premiums, Fike adds.

Bean says TAA will encourage more producers to participate with more cattle in its feeding project. That will reduce the number of sorts needed for weight and other uniformity. "We want to fine-tune things for the future," he says.

"Our long-range goal is to send a load as often as our members have at least 50 cattle that need to go to the feedyard," Bean says. "We could wind up sending several loads of various sizes two, three or four times a year."

Loads could include steers from members' registered cows as well as progeny from bull customers' herds.

With the tight cattle markets of late, Knoll says, "You can't afford not to take advantage of every dollar you can pick up along the way."

"There is some money to be made in good genetics," he says, noting the advantage of making good even better. "Feeding out part of your calf crop and learning what they do

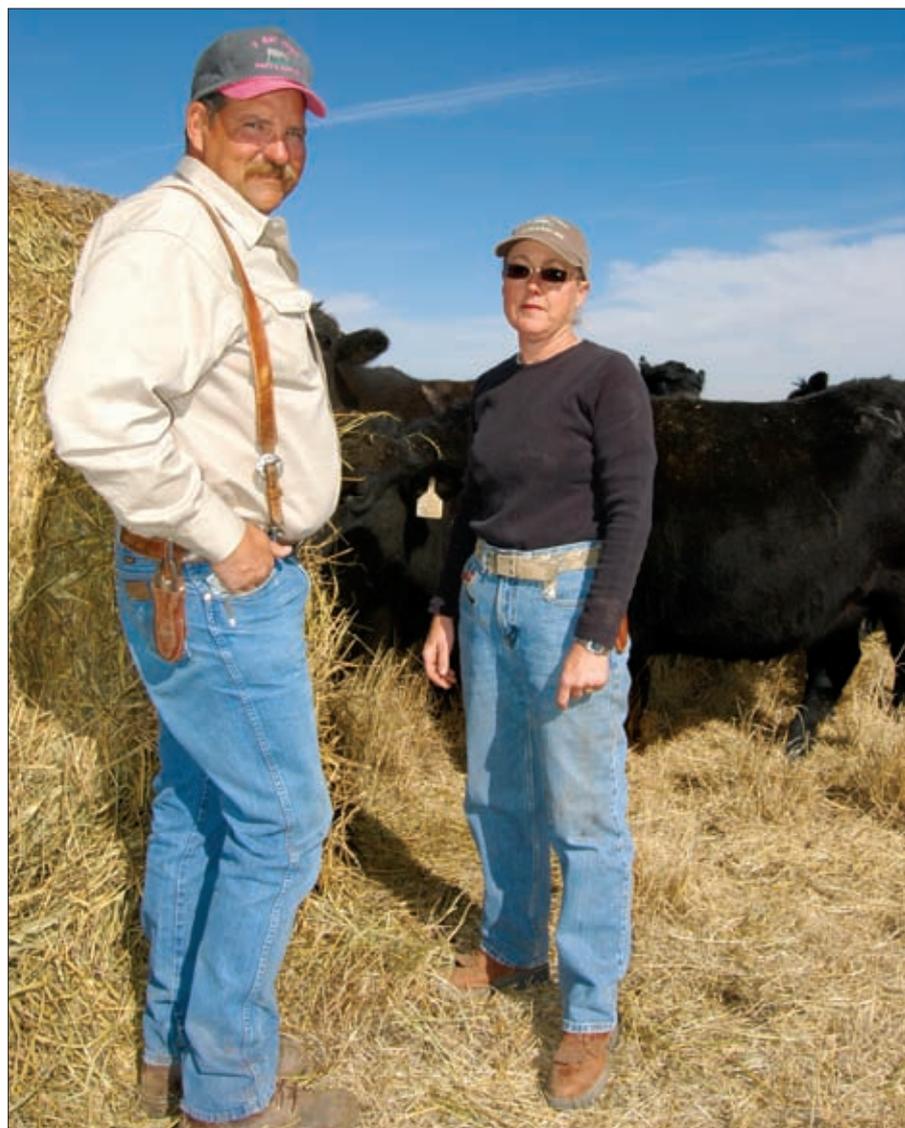
when they leave your ranch is an invaluable real-world experience. You can't beat that."

Genetics aren't the only factor in how cattle perform on feed, Knoll adds. "The ranch and feedyard environments are also important," he says. "The first sign of stress on these cattle can take the marbling out. Marbling is a living thing. You can kill it any time in the calf's life with stress, lameness or other problems."

"A lot of it just comes back to good husbandry and taking care of your cattle's needs," Knoll says. "You may have to supplement more than you want in a drought or in winter because, again, when cattle are stressed, through their diet or other reasons, they won't perform as well."

He and Bean will be among those taking part in future TAA feeding programs.

"You know how your cattle stack up, how they do, how they handle," Knoll counts off the reasons. "It's easier to sell to customers if you know how your cattle perform. It's practicing what you preach."



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