

Trace Your Luck

Tracking trouble to its source can reverse a run of 'bad luck' in the feedlot.

by Raylene Nickel

Life isn't perfect, and perhaps folks who feed cattle know that better than anyone. Stuff happens. Cattle go off feed, they get sick, they die, or they grade poorly — often for no apparent reason. Chance and the law of averages predict that problems in the feedlot will come.

But a spell of bad luck often heralds more than happenstance. Even minor trouble can red-flag correctable problems. Investing time and money in tracing the trouble to its source, and correcting the problem, can pay off now and in the future.

Knowing when to start digging for a cause to this bad luck takes an artful eye, a good handle on past performance of cattle from a given herd, or cattle managed under similar conditions, and a whole lot of intuition.



► Craig Sheppard of CSA Cattle Co. LLC, Leoti, Kan., helped a producer pinpoint a new bull as the reason behind lower-grading calves.

► Scott Mueller of Samson Inc., Platte Center, Neb., tells how high-performing genetics turned out to be a contributor to a health problem in one of three pens originating from the same producer. Mueller overcame the weather-related feed-intake problems by changing the ration and providing greater Type A clostridial protection via vaccination.

A blend of all three contributed to the solution for a problem surfacing in one group of cattle that Craig Sheppard, CSA Cattle Co. LLC, remembers well. One year, a producer whose cattle had been grading 75%-95% Choice, with an above-average

Certified Angus Beef[®]

(CAB[®])-acceptance rate, saw a higher number of carcasses grading Select and Standard.

The number of these poor carcasses was not enough to suggest trouble in an average herd, says Sheppard from his Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed yard near

Leoti, Kan. But for this producer it was a red flag, given his herd's track record for carcass quality.

"We started trying to find the source of the trouble by reviewing the way we'd managed the cattle, searching for things we'd done differently with this group," he says. "Did we change feeds? Did we vaccinate differently?" But Sheppard and the producer could turn up no differences in management from year to year.

However, as the producer traced individual carcass data to cows, a pattern emerged: Most problem carcasses came from calves whose dams were in the same breeding pasture the year the calves were conceived. Several bulls serviced cows in that

group, but only one of those bulls was new to the herd.

With this insight, the rancher suspected the new bull was the source of the trouble. To test his theory, he kept the bull in a separate pasture the following breeding season and gave him a limited number of cows. Sure enough, after these calves were hung on the rail, some 90% graded Select or lower.

"The bull looked good," Sheppard says, "but genetically he had no marbling capabilities, and a follow-up sonogram predicted this. The experience reinforced the importance of using bulls from reputable breeders who can provide information about the carcass quality of their cattle. In the Angus breed today we have a wealth of information available to us."

Let information be a guide

Wayne Smith, manager of CAB partner feedlot Hergert Feeding Co., Mitchell, Neb., tells a similar story with a different ending. One of his clients typically fed cattle that achieved 25%-30% CAB, with a high percentage going Choice.

But for no apparent reason, last year the client had four cattle grading Select and Yield Grade (YG) 4, a definite flag in view of the cattle's past history of carcass quality. Because of individual identification (ID) throughout his herd, the producer was able to identify the dams of the problem calves.

"As it turned out, the poor-performing calves came from one cow and her three daughters," Smith says. "It was the first year the producer had had the opportunity to kill and gather carcass data on all the progeny from that particular cow family. It was a dramatic showing of the negative genetic influence just one cow family can have. The incident proves, too, that using an individual identification system within a herd can reap benefits by identifying and correcting simple economic factors."

Scott Mueller of CAB partner feedlot Samson Inc., Platte Center, Neb., tells how high-performing genetics turned out to be a contributor to trouble. A producer brought calves to the feedlot in three cuts, to be fed in



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER



► Wayne Smith, manager of CAB partner feedlot Hergert Feeding Co., Mitchell, Neb., helped a producer track the source of poor-grading cattle back to one cow family.

separate pens. The first draft of calves comprised the producer's heaviest, top-performing cattle.

Though the three pens were managed similarly, calves in the first pen mysteriously began suffering from sudden bloat. In fact, death loss in that pen tallied 4%, while there were no deaths in the second and third pens.

Because postmortem examinations turned up no solid causes for bloating and death, Mueller and his staff had few clues to follow — other than the fact cattle seemed to die quickly by the feedbunk, with the greatest (but not all) incidence occurring during periods of stressful or changeable weather.

The link between feed and weather suggested the bloat was triggered by changes in feed intake. And, Mueller theorizes, the top-performing cattle were the most susceptible because they ate the most feed.

Following that rationale, he corrected the problem by focusing on the ration. He added roughage to the feed and made ration adjustments in smaller increments. He also changed the feedlot's vaccination program to provide greater Type A clostridial protection.

"Through that process we eliminated feed-related deaths," Mueller says. "Because we're still not certain what exactly caused the deaths, we made these changes simply to reduce our exposure to risk in high-performing cattle. Our whole feedyard has benefited as a result."

Ranch source

In yet another instance of tracing poor health in the feedlot to its source, the trail led back to the ranch. Derek Martin of CAB partner Lane County Feeders Inc., Dighton, Kan., remembers one set of calves coming into the feedlot and breaking with disease right away, despite being weaned for 45 days and vaccinated preweaning as well as at weaning.

"We didn't want to chalk up the trouble to bad luck," he says, "so we tested blood on some of the calves and found they weren't building immunity even though they were vaccinated. Then we dug deeper and took liver samples."

The results showed the calves were deficient in copper. Copper injections solved the problem at the feedlot, and a mineral supplement supplied to the herd at the ranch remedied the trouble at its source.

A team effort at CAB partner Decatur County Feed Yard LLC, Oberlin, Kan., also traced trouble all the way back to the ranch. "Cattle in one pen were breaking with respiratory disease," says feedlot owner/manager Warren Weibert. "A few cattle died, and the pen riders just didn't like the looks of the cattle overall. They believed something out of the ordinary was wrong."

Sure enough, ear-notch samples taken from both live and dead cattle proved the cattle had bovine viral diarrhea (BVD). Because adult animals can carry and transmit the disease without showing symptoms, a consulting veterinarian advised the rancher to test all cattle in the herd. Cattle at the ranch did indeed turn out to be carriers.

"This producer had no idea his herd had a problem with BVD," Weibert says. "But he culled cattle that turned up positive and was able to absolutely rid his herd of the disease. It was a real team effort that led to this discovery and solution of a problem back at the ranch."

No matter the apparent hex on your cattle, these examples prove the wisdom of a scientific approach rather than shaking your fist at fate. Cattle feeders say communication, records and testing are the basis for most solutions.

