



A carcass data project in Kansas allows producers of any scale to pinpoint herd attributes and deficiencies and to capitalize on that knowledge.

STORY & PHOTOS BY BRAD PARKER

**T**here are several definitions of “quality cattle.” Knowing which best applies to yours requires tracking them through the feedyard and the packinghouse. That can be a challenge if you don’t have a large number of cattle to feed each year.

From 1992 to 1998, the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program’s Value Discovery Project (VDP) allowed producers to feed a whole pen or just a few steers in a commercial feedlot and to collect individual performance and carcass data. The project taught Bruce Rinkes, Hoyt, Kan., much about the stock being produced at Rinkes Cattle Co.

After the CAB Program discontinued the VDP, Rinkes wondered if the Kansas Angus Association (KAA) could step into the void and provide the same lessons to its members and their customers. Hence, the idea behind the KAA Carcass Data Project (CDP) began to form.

Rinkes recruited Barb Downey of Downey Ranch Inc., Wabauunsee, Kan., to help with the idea because she, too, had gained a lot from the VDP. Then he went to the KAA board of directors, of which he was a member at the time, and secured \$500 to conduct the project’s first mailing.

They hoped to enroll 150 head in the inaugural project. In the end, 16 herds placed 178 head in Brookover Ranch Feedyard Inc., Garden City, Kan., in fall 1998.

The next year, they followed managers Tom Jones and Jerry Riemann to Hy-Plains Feedyard LLC at Montezuma, Kan., and enrolled approximately 235 head from 19 herds. This past fall, they enrolled 341 head from 16 herds.

Rinkes says the CDP helps cattlemen determine where their herds are now and how they best could use value-based marketing. And it shows new producers what the breed has to offer in terms of feed efficiency and carcass merit.



### Genetic insights

The ability to determine or to confirm the value of genetics is why Rinkes encourages other Angus breeders to get involved, then to share the results with commercial cattlemen.

“I’d like to see more seedstock producers put the lower end of their calves in this thing, and I think they’d benefit themselves and the commercial customer further,” he says, recommending that breeders castrate the bottom 15% of their bull crops and enter those steers to test their herd sires.

Downey adds that the CDP allows small-scale producers to collect the type of data larger producers can get on their own.

“When you don’t know what your cattle are going to do on a grid, it’s a big leap to take,” she says of retained ownership. “This way, they can get carcass and performance data, which hopefully will help them to market cattle better and maybe even modify their breeding programs.”

Osage City, Kan., commercial cattleman Ron Fredrickson, who manages 200 spring pairs and 40 fall pairs on Fredrickson Farm with his wife, Patricia, and foreman, Jim Balding, says he’s sent five head through the project each year because they wanted feedyard data. “Because of our cash-flow situation, we couldn’t retain ownership and send a herd out. By sending five out, we’ve been able to take the results of that sample and improve our herd. Without the Angus project, I would not have the opportunity to do that.”

Downey says the project includes small, part-time commercial producers to full-time purebred breeders. Purebred breeders account for 75% of enrolled herds this year, and many of them have commercial cows, too.

Few have fed their own cattle before this. “For most of them, this is a totally new experience,” Downey explains. “So, if you ask if we still need this kind of project, I’d say ‘yes’ because this is the first time for most people.”

Above: The Kansas Angus Association Carcass Data Project allows producers to track a sample of their calves through the feedyard and the packinghouse without a major investment.

## Project procedures

Each fall, the KAA invites nonmembers in Kansas who have received a transferred registration in the last three years and all KAA members to enroll cattle in the CDP.

All steers must have been born that spring and must be Angus-based, though not necessarily black-hided. Enrollment forms and \$10/head for the first 10 head, then \$5/head thereafter, are due to Downey by Nov. 20. Adults are required to enter at least five head, and juniors need at least three.

Downey then sends enrollees project ear tags, which must be in the cattle before they arrive at the feedyard, and the list of required vaccinations — two rounds against infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD), bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV), parainfluenza-3 virus (PI<sub>3</sub>), seven-way haemophilus and pasteurilla.

Rinkes says there are no exceptions to the vaccination requirements and the mandatory 45-day weaning period before shipment to the feedyard. "It's not fair to the rest of the people who have done all the management practices," he says.

The requirements didn't necessitate much change at Fredrickson Farm. They just had to move up their weaning date about a month.

"It wasn't anything extra that we had to do," Fredrickson relates. "They want them weaned and, in essence, preconditioned for 45 days. We do that anyway."

Rinkes arranges transportation to the yard for those who need it. "They'll stop and make a lot of 20-head pickups," he says of the hired truck. "We don't have to have everything in one spot." They do, however, try to get at least 75 head at a stop because it's a challenge to find loading facilities along the route that are large enough for the semitrailer.

The cattle arrive at the feedyard between 7 and 8 on a



Barb Downey (right) believes it was vital for the project to partner with a feedyard willing to give them extra attention. "Tom [Jones], Jerry [Reimann] (left) and their yard foreman, Scott Tucker, have been very accommodating," she says of Hy-Plains Feedyard LLC.

mid-December evening. They are weighed and commingled. Downey records individual in-weights and tag numbers. Most steers, like Fredrickson's, wear three tags: the producer's, the project's and the feedyard's. "If they lose one, there should be backups," Downey says.

In early March, John Brethour, a professor of beef cattle nutrition from the Kansas State University Agricultural Research Center at Hays, Kan., insonates (subjects to ultrasound) the steers to predict their quality and yield grades.

Based on their carcass characteristics, weights, average daily gains (ADGs), the going cost of gain and the grid on which the steers are marketed, a computer program helps Brethour to assign them to one of four outcome groups. The first will be harvested shortly thereafter, and the others will go in one-month intervals following that.

The outcome group to which an animal is assigned also determines what, if any, growth promotant it receives. The goal is to finish the steers at Yield Grade (YG) 2 or 3 with the highest possible quality grade.

The harvest groups are kept together after scanning to

eliminate further sorting. "When that processing date comes up, I call the plant and make the arrangements, and they can just sweep the pen," Downey says.

The fed steers go to Farmland National Beef in Dodge City or Liberal, Kan. They are marketed on the U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid using Downey Ranch and Gardiner Angus Ranch slots, which are "loaned" to the KAA.

Ribeye area (REA), marbling score, fat thickness, final yield grade and average daily gain



Bruce Rinkes proposed the Carcass Data Project to help fill the void left when the Certified Angus Beef Program discontinued its Value Discovery Project.

(ADG) for each animal are returned to the producer.

"Everyone gets their complete data, their individual feed, medicine, yardage, processing, etc.," Downey says. "They do not see anyone else's information. They do, however, get the group averages to compare themselves to. Occasionally, I may highlight an animal — the high-value or -return carcass, for example — but I don't identify the owner."

Fredrickson appreciates being kept up-to-date on the feed costs, consumption, pulls to the sick pen, ADG, weight, results of the ultrasound and expected harvest dates. "She does a tremendous job. That's been very helpful," he says of Downey's bimonthly reports, adding it's well worth the cost of enrollment. "For what she does, it's a nominal fee."

## Getting results

Downey says the project's crossbred and straightbred steers averaged about 4 lb. ADG overall the first two years. "We've had some pretty good years, weatherwise, but that's still darn good performance," she says.

The costs of gain are averaging 42¢-45¢/lb., which is great while fed cattle are selling

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in the \$80s/hundredweight (cwt.), she adds.

Fredrickson also has watched the costs of gain and the ADGs closely all three years. In fact, it's been a kind of experiment for him.

The first year, he entered five Gelbvieh-Angus steers that averaged 4.46 lb. ADG and 38¢/lb. cost of gain. The next year, he entered five Charolais-Angus crosses that averaged 4.18 lb. and 42¢. This year, his five Limousin-Angus steers averaged 4.53 lb. and 46¢.

"We found that there was as much variation within each group as there was between groups," he shares.

The project is topping industry averages for percent qualifying as *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®), Choice and Prime carcasses. Their first year, they achieved 32% Select and 68% Choice or better, with 36% CAB and 5% Prime, while averaging 3.91 lb. ADG. In 1999-2000, they achieved 31% Select and 69% Choice or better, with 24% CAB and 5% Prime, while averaging 4.04 lb. ADG.

The project cattle have performed at or near the top of the yard, which Downey attributes to the preconditioning and the Angus influence.

"Some people think that you can't get these really low costs of gain on British cattle, but we've closed out at the top of the yard. If you get the right genetics and handle them right, you can even be the playing field a lot," she says.

Last year, participants made \$77/head more than they would have had they taken the steers to the sale barn on the day they sent them to Montezuma, Downey figures.

### Strengths, challenges

Rinkes says the project's greatest asset is the cooperation with the feedyard. For example, if he or Downey sees a weight that looks wrong, the feedyard staff will reweigh the calf.

Downey has fed cattle at six different feedyards during her career, and she agrees the yard has a big effect on the final product.

"There's a definite difference between feedlots in what they

can do with these calves and how they feed them," she says. "Feeding is both a science and an art form, and some do better with cattle that have gone on as yearlings that have grazed, and some do better with younger cattle that come straight off their mamas."

It was vital to partner with a feedyard that allowed the ultrasound, extra sorting and tracking of individual sick costs, she says. "You need to find a good feedyard who is willing to give you a lot more attention than your average 300-head feeding customer. Tom, Jerry and their yard foreman, Scott Tucker, have been very accommodating. Hy-Plains has done an excellent job for us."

Downey sees three other advantages for producers in the CDP.

First, individual carcass merit — weight, yield grade and quality grade — determines price. "If you're raising a Prime carcass, you get paid a lot more than the guy who's sending in a Select. It's a nice advantage," she says.

Second, it only takes five head to get into the project, which shouldn't break anyone.

Third, individual harvest dates are used. "You're not sending some steer that's not even close to ready to go and some steer that should have been gone two months ago," she explains. "They're going a lot closer to their optimum harvest date than a total-in, total-out program.

"Even if you sent what you thought was the most uniform group of steers, I can guarantee you that one will be ready to go in March and one will be ready to go in June. ... What's uniform visually is not what's uniform on a carcass basis."

Downey says the project is a way for seedstock producers to demonstrate the quality of their genetics and a way for commercial cattlemen to test their product. Seedstock producers can help both their customers and themselves by encouraging enrollment or by buying back the calves (or shares of them) and entering them on their own.

"Even if these guys are intent on selling weaned cattle from here on out, it becomes more and more important to have this information behind them," she says, adding that once a producer knows how the cattle perform, it can make a difference at the sale barn.

That's exactly the thing on which Fredrickson is counting when he meets with order buyers on his farm or at one of two area auction markets.

"When we sell the rest of them or when buyers come to look at them, I give them the results of the Angus project," he says. He likes to point out the ADG, the 4.8 average marbling score, the 0.25-inch (in.) average fat thickness, the early harvest dates and the yield grades. "I basically show them everything we get. But most of them are interested in average daily gain."



Weights are recorded for each steer when it arrives at the feedyard in mid-December, then again in early March.

The data from the CDP also have confirmed the need for preconditioning, Fredrickson says, which has become a selling point for them.

Despite the advantages, Rinkes says producers initially are scared by the loss of control. "Once those cattle are loaded on the truck, they don't see anything more than a piece of paper and a check — hopefully a check, not a death certificate."

That lack of experience, he adds, is the CDP's biggest challenge. "At home, the only death loss they're ever exposed to is at calving time," he explains.

Yet some first-time feeders still want to send their entire calf crops, which Rinkes discourages. "I just as soon turn them down and tell them to send five or 10. If their cattle aren't close to the grid, they are going to get beat to death," he says.

Another challenge producers may face relates to cash flow. When you've planned for a big payday in November or December, it's difficult to tell the banker you're postponing it until March — or June — so you can put unknown calves through the feedyard. It's even harder when weanlings are bringing \$100/cwt. at the sale barn.

Downey says her biggest challenge is the number crunching. "The producers have been very cooperative and very understanding," she says, explaining that it takes her 14-18 days to get checks distributed.

### Long-term lessons

Downey says the greatest lesson of the project has been the differences in cattle. Two calves that perform the same in the feedyard may have different marbling abilities, which can mean a \$200 spread in net return — the difference between making and losing money.

"Cattle very similar in genetic background, phenotype and weight can be hundreds of dollars apart in their net

returns," she says. In a recent harvest group, the highest-netting animal earned \$857, and the lowest-netting animal earned \$583. Their in-weights were barely 50 lb. apart.

"As you're getting closer to the end product, paying closer attention to your genetics becomes more important," Downey adds.

Another lesson relates to illness. "The cost of a calf's getting sick in the feedyard is not only your medicine cost," Downey explains. "These calves that go out early tend to not get sick. ... You don't have as much feed in them; they obviously don't have the medicine in them; they tend to grade better; they tend to perform better in average daily gain."

She encourages people to use the data collected through the project to track trends. "If you

have a lot of cattle grading Select, you probably need to pay a little more attention to marbling," she points out.

She learned that her calves' REAs were too small for their carcass sizes, so she incorporated that into her sire selections. Now she's selecting sires that will maintain REA while improving in other areas.

But there are too many variables affecting the data to make any judgments about individual cows or sires, Downey warns. "I would never look at the dam of this calf and say, 'She needs to go,'" she emphasizes.

"If you've got a fertile, productive cow, don't cull her because of a bad carcass," she continues. "Take that information and maybe make a mating decision based on it, but still the most important factor is whether she can get a live calf on

the ground and get it to weaning.

"I think that's maybe one of the biggest downfalls: A person might be tempted to make culling decisions based on this," she says of the project.

That lesson isn't lost on Fredrickson, who plans to adjust his mating strategies to improve the uniformity of his calves. He's also exploring new marketing strategies that allow him to direct different calves to different grids. "It's hard to say when the hide is on, but hopefully we can," he says. The CDP data should help with that endeavor.

"We made the biggest change that helped us when we realized that we could sell feeders with a little more investment rather than just calves right off the cow," he says. "I think the Angus project helped us make that decision."



In early March, John Brethour insonates the steers to predict their quality and yield grades.



Brethour has developed software that uses an animal's projected carcass characteristics, its feedlot performance and current economic factors to help make chuteside predictions about an optimal harvest date.



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