

# Getting Better in the Good Times

*Feeding Quality Forum tells of volatility, high prices and expectations.*

*by Miranda Reiman, director of digital content and strategy*

In the '80s and '90s, consumers spoke, and the beef industry responded in a big way. Today's record beef demand success story isn't just a historical tale; it's also a roadmap for the future, said speakers at this year's Feeding Quality Forum.

Hosted Aug. 22-23, in Lincoln, Neb., the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) program covered everything from current market conditions and technology to price forecasts and advancements on the horizon.

"It's hats off to you as an industry for producing the right genetics, managing those correctly and



bringing high-quality beef to the industry," said Glen Dolezal, Cargill Protein, warning that he doesn't want to go backwards.

As implant programs and new additives come on the market, he suggested feeders test their effects before using them across all their cattle.

"I encourage you to be careful," Dolezal said.

Having the most accurate measures to evaluate carcass quality provides the best data possible to make those decisions, and someday processors of any size could have access to the

same type of tools.

Bucky Gwartney, Agriculture Marketing Service, said 60% of the beef today is graded by the E+V camera system, and all major plants use a camera to at least assist in data gathering and carcass sorting. Typically, rural locker plants haven't been able to access USDA graders due to logistics and cost, but advancements in camera grading applications may allow that process to happen virtually.

In a USDA pilot program, they're testing a cellphone-like device to capture ribeye pictures and call marbling scores. They're addressing the three major hurdles: quality image capture, secure data transfer and integrity of data and product matching throughout the system.

"Technology is coming at us quick. It's going to be better than we've ever had, and I'm convinced it's going to be a mainstay of the grading program," Gwartney says.

## Finding answers, keeping consumers content

Learning more is a step to improvement, and AJ Tarpoff, Kansas State University, and Lily Edwards-Callaway, Colorado State University,



shared ongoing cattle comfort research. They touched on bedding in the summer to cool the ground, changing diet makeup during heat events and offering shade and water.

“It’s not always a cost,” Tarpoff explained. “This truly is an investment in our animals in the long-term productivity of those animals, ultimately leading to how are they going to grade — every single day of that animal on feed... counts.”

Cattlemen can’t control the environment, Edwards-Callaway said, “but we can control some of the things that you do to help promote that comfort for the animals and reduce that discomfort.”

Good animal husbandry helps connect with consumers, too, she said.

“A lot of us have got really cool things we’re doing by ourselves, but we’re going to have to share some of that data, move it up chain efficiently and take advantage of that to get to that next step,” said John Schroeder, Darr Feedlot, noting that’s important to growing consumer confidence.

He, along with Jesse Fulton, University of Nebraska Panhandle Research & Extension and Robert Wells, Noble Research Institute, participated in a stewardship panel led by Kirsten Nickels, CAB sustainability and animal care scientist.

Focusing on the well-being of the land is a key to longevity, Fulton said.

“As long as we’re good stewards to the land, good stewards of our herd, practice good stockmanship, we’re going to be around for a lifetime,” he said. “We can use our programs to tell our story to consumers and make them feel confident in the beef product they’re purchasing.”

Becoming more efficient and using



Above: Dan Basse, AgResource Company, said corn price may go down in the near term, but he’s hesitant to be bearish on corn long-term: “The world does not have enough supply.” Left: Mother Nature makes it tough for animals to live without any discomfort, but good animal husbandry can help, said Lily Callaway-Edwards, Colorado State University.

resources carefully is one aspect of stewardship, and Justin Sexten, Zoetis Beef, gathered producers to talk on the technology they’ve used to that end.

Nebraska cattle feeders Joan Ruskamp, J&S Feedlot, and Zack Lindsley, R&L Feeders, along with Karl Fox, who operates a family feedyard in northeast Iowa, talked about labor and cost savings achieved by using computer programs, advisors and some plain old creativity. Fox said using Performance Beef has shortened the learning curve.

“I don’t want my sons and

daughters to take 30 years to learn. I want them to be better than me next year,” Fox said. “This has helped me improve my operation at a faster rate.”

## Market outlook strong, but volatile

Being flexible and adaptable is as important today as ever, said market analyst Dan Basse, AgResource Company.

“When you put geopolitical things along with weather and the wars that are ongoing, you’re ending up with extreme volatility in a lot of markets,” he explained. “Whether it be cattle, whether it be grain, whether it be equities, it’s going to be volatile.”

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He predicted a range in cattle prices from \$160 per hundredweight (cwt.) to \$220 for a springtime high. He said the supply-driven bull market for cattle has “a lot of legs” because the cow herd is not in full expansion yet.

CAB is preparing for that supply crunch, knowing it means higher prices for restaurants and retailers, said Sara Scott, CAB vice president of foodservice. Her team connects customers with opportunities, builds on relationships and drives home the message of value for the next people in the chain.

“When you talk about Certified Angus Beef as being ‘beef insurance’ for your kitchen, you don’t have to worry about how the product’s going to perform, and that’s really what we’ve hung our hat on now for decades, is that consistency,” she said. “So, at the end of the day, you guys keep making high-quality cattle, and we’ll keep selling them on that.”

That’s a good plan to keep the long lens of beef demand on its current positive trajectory, said industry analyst Nevil Speer. The trend shows more product at higher prices, and that’s not a story the pork or poultry business can tell, he noted.

“More dollars coming into your



Justin Sexten (from left), Zoetis Beef, interviewed Joan Ruskamp, J & S Feedlot; Zack Lindsley, R & L Feeders; and Karl Fox, who operates a family feedyard in northeast Iowa. The producers shared ways they manage risk, pastures and animals in the “Technology to Enhance Efficiency and Quality” session.


business means more opportunities. It means more chances for young people to come back and be involved in this business,” Speer said.

Keeping other families in business is motivational for TJ and Tiffini Olson, Round the Bend Steakhouse, near Ashland, Neb. They joined their foodservice distributor, Lane Rosenberry, Sysco Lincoln, to give a glimpse of the day-to-day interactions on everything from input costs to labor shortages. Their closing message was one of gratitude.

“Without you all doing what you do in those cold, cold winter nights,

caring for that one calf that drops — we understand that to a point, but never had to do that myself — but without that labor of love, we don’t get to have what we have. He doesn’t get to sell it, and I don’t get to serve it,” TJ Olson said.

From the poster that greets diners as they enter the establishment to the way they prepare the steaks as simply as possible to let the beef shine, the Olsons are true ambassadors for cattle producers.

“There’s a story from the second that calf drops to the time it hits our plate, and we are absolutely honored to tell that story,” TJ said. “Thank you so much to each and every one of you for doing what you all do.” 



Currently the beef industry is at “the highest level of quality I’ve ever experienced in my career,” said Glen Dolezal, Cargill Protein. He’d like to keep it that way.

*Editor’s note: Certified Angus Beef hosted the 18th annual Feeding Quality Forum Aug. 22-23 in Lincoln, Neb. The event was sponsored by AngusLink<sup>SM</sup>, Feedlot Magazine, Select Sires, Performance Livestock Analytics, Diamond V and Drovers. To learn more or view coverage, visit [www.feedingqualityforum.com](http://www.feedingqualityforum.com).*