

Electronic Management Improves Efficiency

BY AMANDA DAVIS

Quality, carcass traits, profit and efficiency can be achieved in the feedyard if the yard is managed correctly. Now, with the help of electronic cattle management, this job can be accomplished more easily while still ensuring the safe product consumers want at a lower cost to the producer.

Warren Weibert, owner and manager of Decatur County Feed Yard near Oberlin, Kan., says the system allows for the maximum profit for the producer.

Weibert says Decatur County's production goal is to ensure top performance, improve product quality, provide greater convenience, and work toward consistency and quality. Weibert says that in the early 1980s the best means to achieve profitability was to find ways to improve cattle performance.

Before electronic management was used at Decatur County, Weibert says, their management system was inefficient and work had to be done to improve the feed

bill. The goal of Decatur County is to manage diversity and carcass traits in order to produce the best beef for the consumer and for the animal's owner. Diversity includes receiving weight, target weight, health of the animal, marbling, fat and muscling.

The system allows each animal to be monitored, fed according to its individual needs and finished at the appropriate time.

Cattle are identified with electronic ear tags that allow the animals to be tracked and records kept. Then each animal is worked to determine into which predicted-outcome group the animal falls. Each time the animal goes through the barn, a printout is sent to the owner.

"We will sort cattle into two groups when they arrive, and [they] will be commingled with other cattle of the same [predicted outcome]," Weibert says. "Based on how the cattle changed, we will keep regrouping."

For instance, one producer may have 200

head at the feedyard; 25 may finish early, 125 may finish a week later, then the rest may finish two weeks after that. Since individual animals are monitored, each goes to slaughter at the optimal time for the best quality.

Weibert says a producer could have one animal or the whole group go on the truck. If one is taken, the producer is paid for that single animal.

The target at the feedlot is a 12-week feeding period. This is adjusted for each animal. Genetics play a big role in the way an animal finishes.

"We are sorting what you sent us in genetics," Weibert says. "You can see how they sort the first time and then go back and work on genetics as a producer. It benefits all. We are trying to maximize the net return per cow and get the losers out [as] efficiently as [we] can."

Weibert says he would like to see the producer work on improving the genetics. The key to it all is sorting the cattle effectively and making genetic changes.

Weibert says he is a firm believer in the electronic system as his feedyard finishes 45 days ahead of the industry on the grid, and they have significantly fewer dark cutters. They have improved their efficiency by meeting their goal of more than 90% of the animals finishing in the 12-week time in the top quality manageable.

They started the program in 1994 with one chute for processing and went on to set a record last year managing 36,000 cattle. On May 15, 1999, they finished new facilities to include five chutes on two different alleyways to increase the output of cattle and to ease cattle handling.

Weibert says he believes the working area plays an important role in how the cattle finish. Good lighting with no shadows ensures the cattle will move more smoothly and quietly. After going to the chute, the cattle are sorted into three pens and can be divided from there to as many as seven pens. Three forms of identification (ID) tags are used on each animal.

The reasoning behind this system is efficiency in meeting the standards consumers want, Weibert says.

Editor's note: Amanda Davis is a senior in animal sciences and industry at Kansas State University and a participant in our Young Guns Student Writers Program.

