

# An Ever-Learning Process

Gregory Feedlots' longtime manager named CAB 2004 Quality Assurance Officer of the Year.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**



**Y**ou could call David Trowbridge a master of cooperative education as much as cattle feeding. That's why Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) calls him the 2004 Quality Assurance (QA) Officer of the Year.

Perhaps no other CAB feedlot has been more successful in customer education and building long-term partnerships with Angus producers than Gregory Feedlots Inc., Tabor, Iowa. Trowbridge is the main reason.

He came here as manager, straight out of the University of Nebraska in 1977, because he made a good first impression. Originally from Page, Neb., where the Sandhills meet the Cornbelt, Trowbridge married on the day he and his bride, Mary, graduated in December 1976.

"We were living in Omaha looking for jobs and babysitting for Grant and Karen Gregory while they were traveling," says Trowbridge, with his trademark gravelly tenor and reflective smile.

Feedlot owner Jim Gregory recalls, "I was looking for a manager, and my brother said I should talk to David. I hired him on the spot, and he's been here ever since."

Trowbridge is a perfectionist by nature, Gregory says, but there was a learning curve. "If you try anything you're going to make a mistake once in a while, but you can tell by what he's done that he does things the right way," he says. "I have just let him do his thing,

and he has kind of grown up with the feedlot."

That quest for perfection — while not afraid to try new things — helps Trowbridge stand out among 12 excellent monthly QA award winners, says Paul

Dykstra, CAB feedlot specialist. As QA Officer of the Year, Trowbridge wins a trip for two to the National Finals Rodeo (NFR) in Las Vegas, Nev., this December.

Within a feedlot that dates back to the earliest licensing relationship with CAB, in late

1998, Trowbridge continues as a great asset to managing quality cattle, Dykstra says. "He's diligent in communicating the importance of genetic improvement in carcass traits to his feeding clientele. He has helped build the brand by coordinating involvement of the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) feedlots in the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program," Dykstra says. "David is just a strong advocate of feeding for the brand."

One means of promoting that is the National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC). Gregory Feedlots was the top volume entry participant last year, and, with 24 pens entered by April, the yard seems headed for another top showing this year.

By an arrangement Trowbridge helped establish, every eligible pen of known Angus-sired calves in the TCSCF is automatically enrolled in the NACC, and all feedlots in the futurity have become CAB-licensed. "It's all about education, letting futurity producers compare their cattle to the best in the industry, and it doesn't cost them anything extra," he says. "If they get close to winning, next year they can cull and pre-sort at home and try again."

Darrell Busby, TCSCF manager and southwest Iowa area Extension beef specialist, says Trowbridge has a great combination of attitude and ability. "David always sees the feedlot's role as a partner in the whole industry, rather than as a segment. His attention to detail and the nice job he does in training employees really shows — everyone understands what's expected of them, and they do it well."

## Creating networks

Trowbridge has made a specialty out of working with producer networks, including members of C.K. Allen's Woodlawn Alliance, based in Savannah, Mo., and the Quality Beef Producers (QBP), based in Washington County, Ind. Just last year, Grand River Premium Producers of King City, Mo., started feeding at Gregory's.

Gregg Staley, group member from Rea, Mo., says it's the first calf crop Grand River has fed anywhere without death loss. Staley's 150 cows join forces with some 900 others to produce about 400 feedlot steers of similar Angus-based genetics.

"We visited the feedlot a couple of times and saw all the pens they had year after year, including some from our neighbors," Staley says. "David has been real easy to work with, and I'm sure we'll be back next year — it helps to have the cattle so close that we can go up and see them."



► **Above:** David Trowbridge uses CAB enrollment and data as educational and marketing tools.

"We've been happy with the gains, but now we want to settle down with close feedlot coordination to get more accepted for CAB," Staley says. "The key to that is information."

Byron Fagg, QBP coordinator and retired Purdue University Extension educator, has worked with Trowbridge for six years. "Our guys, 35 to 40 members with 4,500 cows, have never had a complaint. David is always ready to discuss our options to sell, retain full ownership or partner, and multiple options within partnering," Fagg says. "The quality of feeding and information returned is great, and he is great about keeping all of us informed."

It's starting to pay off. "Our cattle are improving faster than they were," Fagg says. "After studying the data, converted to dollar comparisons across all cooperators, several members have sold bulls that failed to make the CAB percentages they were looking for." When the group started, nobody sold fed cattle on a grid; now most of them sell on grids, and at least half the members retain ownership.

Trowbridge enjoys tracking the many variables of beef production, discovering what works and sharing information to help customers. When he sees a mystery — such as the common 56% to 66% range in dressing percent — he seeks answers. That's one reason all NACC and TCSCF calves are individually weighed when received, at reimplant and at harvest.

"We need to get enough numbers to see if it's genetics, or just the fill on that day; how much can dressing percent vary and why? Do we just have to live with that?" Trowbridge wonders. "It's strange to have so much variation in otherwise good cattle."

### Educational tools

He uses CAB enrollment and data as educational and marketing tools. At 16.5% CAB-acceptance rate, Trowbridge has set no records for overall quality at Gregory Feedlots. "That's because I enter a lot of cattle I don't know anything about," he admits. "Why? As an advertising deal, we tell people we will get data and see how they compare — we will always have those in the discovery phase.

"I use it to show people who buy at the sale barn what they are getting," Trowbridge says, "and they have made some changes based on feedback. They're finding out more about the cattle when they can, trying to buy those that are more than just black. If we can drive demand for quality at auction, we send



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a demand message to the producers selling. With the combination of grade, premiums and predictability from the most accurate database, more of them will be Angus."

The main reason Trowbridge seeks to educate producers is to upgrade genetics of placements in the feedyard. "I optimize what I get, but I don't know how to change it a lot," he says — except through communication with producers. "You can predict management based on knowledge of genetics in the cow herd," Trowbridge says. "If a guy can tell me, then he probably does a pretty good job of managing; if he doesn't know, we've probably got problems."

Talking to producers from a dozen states, the Iowa cattle feeder finds some who have been led astray. One in Indiana is trying to change his genetics from a niche lean market to mainstream or better quality.

"He's trying to figure out what he needs to do to get marketable cattle. When you are devoted to a niche market, you don't have other options," Trowbridge observes.

He had to tell a Mississippi prospect that, considering the value of cull cows, he would be at more of an advantage to sell out and start from scratch.

"People think they can't afford to keep heifers now, but cows are worth a lot, too," he says. "We talk about EPDs (expected progeny differences) and what they mean, because a lot of guys really don't know. It is easy to recommend Angus because they have everything. But people say they can't change, or it will take too long. I

just tell them they can buy the right bull and make a 50% improvement next year."

### Dedicated to Angus

If it sounds like Trowbridge is getting awfully deep into genetics for a cattle feeder, it's all part of the plan. For the last three years he has been genetics coordinator for Grant Gregory's 350-cow ranch near Buffalo, Wyo., trying to upgrade the eastbound feeder calves. After two years of artificial insemination (AI) to balanced-trait Angus bulls, he says, "There is a lot of potential out there, but it really is a slow process."

The ranch retained its first heifers from the AI program, and those were bred AI this year. The mature cow herd has gone back to natural service because of labor considerations, but Trowbridge buys mostly

half-brother registered Angus bulls. "Otherwise, all I can tell you is they are all black cows," he says with a sheepish grin.

While Trowbridge enjoys greater involvement in cow herd genetics, his feedlot focus never wavers. Among the practices currently under scrutiny: Automatic treatment of all suspected sick cattle. "We take 90% of what most customers don't keep for replacements, often from a 90-day calving

season," he explains. "Most pens have some lighter calves, and it seems they get treated more.

"They may get pulled partly because of a bias that they look like dinks," Trowbridge says. "We have veterinarians treat, and the

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rule has been to treat all pulls. We learned from the TCSCF comparisons that we have a higher treatment rate. The more treatments, the less profit, so now we are creating an observation pen, looking at the reasons calves are pulled, maybe just watching them for a couple of days. It's an ever-learning process."

Jim Gregory agrees. "It's amazing what we find out sometimes, as the industry keeps changing and producers change genetics to

keep up," he says. "We may think we have learned a lot in the last 10 years, but it will be a heck of a lot more in the next five."

A guiding principle from the QA Officer of the Year: "We have to remember that we are producing cattle for people to eat, and we have to eat them all," Trowbridge says. "Let's make all of them as consistently high quality as possible."



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