



Making It Real

Feeder educates commercial producers, consumers alike.

Story & photos by *Miranda Reiman*

It's just luck of the draw. Your calves get sick in the feedyard. That sets them back, costs you all kinds of money and ruins your hopes for what could have been.

The guy next to you catches a break. Sure, his cattle endured the same rough winter, and he paid like crazy for corn, too, but his group gained and graded like mad.

The kicker is, it's not all luck.

David Trowbridge, manager of Gregory Feedlots at Tabor, Iowa, uses a hypothetical scenario like that to educate feedyard visitors on how everything from genetics and ranch care to implants and markets can affect beef quality later on.

Everyone gets a workbook and a virtual calf when they begin. A little more of the story is revealed as they make stops at the processing barn, the feedmill and the pens. Like a cliffhanger in a novel, each

development leaves visitors looking forward to the next chapter with anticipation. At the end, some make a profit. Some lose money. But all leave with a greater understanding of the many variables involved with feeding

cattle and producing beef.

"What you've got to teach them is that cattle producers care about what they're doing; they care for the animals humanely, and they provide nutrition and great health care," Trowbridge says. "If we can convince the whole world

that that's what we're doing, we'll sell a lot more beef."

This philosophy, along with a commitment to driving interaction at every point in the production chain, earned Gregory Feedlots the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Progressive Partner of the Year Award. Trowbridge accepted at the CAB annual conference in Sunriver, Ore., Sept. 22-24.

**"It makes you feel good when [customers] come back and the cattle are better than they were."
— David Trowbridge**

**Progressive Partner
of the Year**



Complete learning experience

"They understand the importance of educating end users on their segment of the beef industry," says Nikkie Allen, who arranges numerous feedlot tours as corporate meeting planner for CAB. "They take time and put thought into what things they want attendees to walk away with when they leave their property."

The way Trowbridge and feedyard owner Jim Gregory connect with their audience makes it less tour and more complete learning experience.

"They get it," she says. "They know it's about more than show and tell; it's about getting them to understand what they do on a day-to-day basis."

CAB's National Roundup seminar, which brings folks from across the globe to U.S.

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► **Above:** Gregory Feedlots returns individual carcass data back to a large number of ranchers, about 90% of whom have the individual identification needed for age- and source-verified programs. Manager David Trowbridge shows customers they can have more predictable profits with a precise objective.

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cattle country, has visited the feedyard twice. They also host diverse groups, from the American Angus Association's Beef Leaders Institute (BLI) to local cattlemen's events.

Perhaps Trowbridge's 35-year marriage to his schoolteacher wife has rubbed off on him.

"I enjoy meeting the people, and I enjoy the response that people have to learning something new," he says. "Several come up to me afterwards and say, 'I'm not going to complain the next time my meat provider says he's going to raise the price 25¢ a pound.'"

Evaluations from the groups show the experiences are effective.

"I had no idea what really happened at the feedyard, but now I can tell others what they are really doing," one wrote.

Another gave this review: "The feedlot visit was where I learned the most. It really enforces just how much these folks put into being part of CAB and the care that they give their cattle."

Of course, regardless of the plans for the day — tours or not — cattle must be tended.

High-end niche

Trowbridge is an "out in the yard" type of manager, but he does rely heavily on the help of his crew. Office manager June Stahl and comptroller Charles Hopkins lead the pack, which includes just five "outside" employees who share both feedyard and farm duties.

"All I do is talk on the phone and get customers here," Trowbridge says with a quick smile. "They do the work."

The hint of truth in that is probably rooted in the sheer amount of effort it takes to build and maintain relationships — something that has taken on greater importance during

the most recent half of Trowbridge's 35-year career at Gregory.

He estimates 85% of the cattle in the 7,000-head feedyard are retained ownership. They don't actively pursue too many salebarn cattle these days.

"We try to go to the high end," Trowbridge says. "That's a niche we have for keeping customers."

And it's one they were already developing when CAB asked them to be one of the first partners in the Feedlot-Licensing Program back in 1998.

"They said, 'We'll give you guys the information and you can think about it and let us know,'" Trowbridge recalls. "Well, we didn't even have to think about it; it was exactly what we'd been trying to do."

So the two programs have grown hand-in-hand, and they've developed a demanding base of customers who have their sights set on quality.

Data is knowledge

"They want to know how their cattle have done, how their genetic program is working," he says.

Trowbridge returns individual carcass data back to a large number of ranchers, about 90% of whom have the individual identification needed for age- and source-verified programs. If a producer wants to feed for the natural market, they'll do it.

Everything they learn about cattle coming in — from recent history, like vaccines and implants, to cow herd history — helps them do their jobs better, he says.

"Working with the producers we do, we are able to save money, time and stress on the cattle by customizing what's done,"

Trowbridge says. They recommend solid weaning programs.

"If you don't wean at least 30 days, it's the same as taking them right off the cow. Two weeks doesn't count," he says. "Those calves should never have had a bad day. When you wean them, you want them gaining just as good as they do in the feedlot."

In his view, "green cattle" are synonymous with a wreck.

"We want them to come to us fleshy because that means they've done good at home," he says.

They also tailor their sorting.

"If we have enough finished cattle to even make a half a load of cattle, we'll get those cattle out and get them gone," he says. "Then we aggressively market the cattle to keep them selling at 0.4 to 0.5 inches of backfat."

If they're fed at Gregory, they're likely destined for a grid.

"It hasn't been that great the past couple of years," Trowbridge says. "But I've been able to show customers that even if we get \$1 over the base meat price, and if your cattle will grade 85% Choice or better and yield decent, we can beat that price."

"Even if we're looking at a \$2 Choice-Select spread, we're still selling a majority of our cattle on a grid, and making money doing it," he says.

That's what it's all about for Trowbridge, showing his customers that they can have more predictable profits with a precise objective. The ultimate payout for him is seeing repeat customers make progress.

"It makes you feel good when they come back and the cattle are better than they were," he says.

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