

Making More Good Days

McPherson County Feeders secretary wins CAB honors.

Story & photo by *Lacey Altwegg*

Dara Dix will tell you there's no secret to her success, though she may balk at taking credit for it. "I follow all the rules," she says, adding with a laugh, "while killing trees for a living."

You could call her "the secretary" at McPherson County Feeders Inc., a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot near Marquette, Kan. But neither that nor her paper-focused job description are enough to justify her selection as 2009 CAB Quality Assurance (QA) Officer of the Year.

Dix's attention to detail and friendly demeanor help the central Kansas yard enroll more than 6,500 cattle per year in CAB's Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) — with an 84% data capture rate. That's the ratio of how much information actually gets through the process from start to finish, and it's one of the highest among 65 CAB feedlots nationwide.

The QA award, designated all but one year since 2000, honors commitment to quality and dedication to the program. Beef Cattle Specialist Gary Fike of CAB says Dix shows all that and more. "She always wants to do what's right. Her cheerfulness and willingness to serve customer needs has enabled McPherson County Feeders to become a stellar partner in the FLP."

Although Dix has helped improve results at the 10,000-head feedlot in many ways, she never thought she would work in the beef cattle industry for long, let alone eight years.

New environment

Dix wasn't raised on a farm or ranch, nor did she grow up showing cattle at the local county fair. As a girl in Plainville, Kan., 120 miles to the northwest, her agriculture knowledge consisted of watching trucks bring wheat to the town elevator where her father worked.

"I went to college in Grand Island (Nebraska) for accounting," Dix says. "I worked for a convenience store when I returned to Kansas and then a cable company. I never thought I would know cattle prices and why marbling is important."

Her "tree killing" is of an indirect nature related to the amount of paperwork she must fill out daily. The FLP and age- and source-verification programs account for a few reams of paper and a good deal more keyboarding. Dix knew she would get along with the people, but was not so sure about the industry details at first.

"I am the type who can walk into a room knowing no one and leave with a hundred friends," Dix says. "However, it was a challenge to learn the cattle industry and the correct terms for my paperwork."

Despite her initial uncertainty, she found comfort in customer relation skills. "I took care of 200 technicians when I worked at the cable company, and I talked with people every day at the convenience store," she says. "So helping customers on a daily basis at the feedlot was nothing new."

Customer connection

McPherson County Feeders works with customers from Kentucky, West Virginia, Missouri, Oklahoma and Kansas, to name a few. Dix reports carcass information from the CAB database back to those producers on a regular basis.

"I talk to customers about anything and everything," she says. "They may want to know their pay weights or if their cattle have come in, or we may just talk about how their family is doing."

Feedlot manager of 28 years and now owner as well, Allan Sents knows the importance of having a strong customer base. He says Dix understands the goal of serving through the CAB program.

"Sharing the recorded feedback on carcass information with our producers is a priority," Sents says. "Dara is always on top of it and works hard to maintain our feedlot's credibility."

Producer Van Peters of Lehigh, Kan., who has a 15-year relationship with McPherson County Feeders, says he doesn't think Dix ever has a bad day. "Everyone has off days, but Dara never shows it," Peters says. "She's just been a great gal to work with, and she is always pleasant and courteous."

Methods to her madness

"Calendars are my little black books," says Dix, as she points to each month full of appointments. "I have to stay organized, especially with my age- and source-verification paperwork."

Efficiency and effectiveness clearly define the methodology for success. She uses color-coded labels to manage all the accounts. "My CAB labels are green and my source ID (identification) labels are purple; that way they are all easily accessible to me," Dix says.

Duties such as feed inputs and billing



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became routine long ago. "If it is a billing day, I will immediately start inputting feed right away to print off commodity sheets so Allan can figure pricing."

Along with a full program of "normal" tasks, Dix also helps with other aspects of the feedlot. "There are days I don't even make it to my desk," she says. "Sometimes I am weighing a truck while answering the phone with my lunch box still hanging on my arm."

Between talking with producers and corresponding with CAB data manager Wendy Nichols, communication is crucial for all. "If Allan and I didn't communicate about pricing or certain data entries, then that could hurt our customers," Dix says. "When one of us is going to be gone, we make sure to have our ducks in a row before leaving."

Dix may not be sorting cattle or hauling hay, but she's still a part of the feedlot family, even though she hardly ventures past the office.

"My staying inside is a rolling joke around here," she says. "Besides crunching numbers on our processing facility computer, I don't go out in the feedlot." As for making up feeding cards, "I use my handy-dandy map of the yard," she adds.

It just might be that Dix never has a bad day. Sure there are a few little problems, but they really are just that.

To the relief of the feedlot crew, customers and CAB staff, Dix sees no reason to leave. She says, "This job really works well for me and my family, and I have become close with everyone here."