



Rail to Ranch to Rail

Pratt Feeders' Novotny tracks cattle data, earns CAB award.

by Wyatt Bechtel

Tracks and rails have been a big part of Alicia Novotny's life, but growing up, she never dreamed they would lead to work at one of the leading U.S. feedyards.

The railroad first brought her family from Arkansas to the plains of Kansas where her father was a railway engineer. Years later, railroad jobs would move Novotny with her husband and children from the Kansas towns of Pratt to Herington and back to the family farm near Pratt.

That's when she took a job at Pratt Feeders LLC, learned about tracking cattle data from ranch to rail, and began enrolling hundreds of cattle each week with the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP).

Her enthusiasm for statistics and attention to detail soon made Novotny a standout among cooperators at the 70 CAB partner yards across the United States. She was an easy choice to win the 2011 CAB Quality Assurance Officer of the Year award. The annual award has been earned by dedicated

feedlot folks from cattle managers to data wranglers since 2000.

With no background in the cattle feeding industry, Novotny says she learned it takes a lot more than just a little feed to get cattle to grade.

"It's interesting how much thought and science goes into actually getting them to that point where they are ready and then delivered to the packer," she says.

And it all starts long before cattle enter the yard, she discovered. The level of coordinated management and genetic potential come into the picture, too. "They make a difference in how cattle perform," she notes.

A self-described "numbers nerd," Novotny

enjoys collecting and organizing the

performance and carcass statistics that help customers get the most out of their cattle.

"I think it is very important for producers to be able to see all the different combinations of how they decide to breed and manage, and what effect that has on the end product," she says.

This past year she kept busy enrolling nearly 17,000 cattle with CAB and helping convey the feedback that shows 30.9% were accepted for the brand.

Gary Fike, beef cattle specialist with CAB, says, "We all learn a lot by enrolling and tracking these

cattle, but it takes commitment. Pratt Feeders has made it a priority, and she has made it a priority."

That's for sure, says feedlot manager Jerry Bohn. "Alicia is the one who's done it all, day

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► **Above:** Feedlot manager Jerry Bohn credits Alicia Novotny for crunching the numbers day to day, turning in the cattle grid, premiums and numbers.

to day, who turns in the cattle grid, premiums and numbers, with all the names, data, head counts — and a lot of them are age- and source-verified, so that is another block we watch,” he says. “When we get packer grid data two or three days a week, she transmits that for enrolled cattle directly to CAB. She’s done a good job.”

As far as Novotny is concerned, “This is all just part of a team effort starting with Jerry.”

Finding balance

Prior to working at the feedlot job, Novotny served as the economic development coordinator for Herington, looking for win-win deals where prospective businesses might locate there. Now she interacts with cow-calf producers, helping them find the win-win balance of how to use data to add value and get paid for it.

Novotny’s husband, Joe, rides the rails as a conductor, and she needed more time at home with their children. “I just needed to balance that a little better,” she says. “They were really good to work with me on that, more like family than just business.”

Though the position with Pratt Feeders has become part-time accounting and financial work, she’ll still keep up with some CAB enrollments — even as she applies feedlot knowledge to the kids’ 4-H steers.



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“It’s helped me to better understand the rations when we pick one to feed, and as we get toward finishing, what we need to feed,” Novotny says.

She can easily explain to their son and daughter the premium-and-discount system

packers use in determining carcass contest results. Whether at home or in the Pratt Feeders office, Novotny finds fascination in facts, “just seeing how all of that ties together. It’s a lot more scientific than I realized.”

