Feed Analysis Keeps Profit on Track

Goal: Every mouthful of feed created equal, no mouthful left behind.

*by **Katy Kemp,** Certified Angus Beef LLC*

If you've ever tried to fit a square peg in a round hole, you know frustration. If peg shape were a random variable, you'd find some tool to sort out the right ones.

Feed analysis is that kind of tool, especially for those trying to convert variable-quality feedstuffs into high-quality beef. That's according to Fred Vocasek, senior laboratory agronomist with Servi-Tech, who addressed the recent 2014 Feeding Quality Forum in Kearney, Neb., and Amarillo, Texas.

"It's a tool like any other," he said, noting the need to match tool and job. "If I use my crescent wrench as a hammer, it doesn't work very well."

Feeding cattle efficiently requires large-scale thinking with "big data" to achieve what Vocasek called business process management.

"At some point," he said, "you've got to distill it down and come up with a few facts you can use to manage a feedyard."

Focusing on throughput conjures up the factory-farm image, he admits, but adds that scale of management is what allowed Henry Ford to cut car production time from 12 hours to 90 minutes.

With much less automation and much more variability, cattle feeders need every tool they can get to profitably turn feedstuffs into beef, Vocasek said. "Somehow, we've got to

► "Somehow, we've got to identify the variables in feed — everything from the initial quality difference to receiving, storage and handling at the feedlot, mixing, delivery to the bunk, and consumption," said Fred Vocasek, senior laboratory agronomist with Servi-Tech.

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He cited three steps in finding feed quality a variable in need of control: identify, audit and isolate. Sampling is critical for the first step, and its highest goal should be accurate representation along the supply chain.

"Not every field of grain is the same, and within each field there will be variability," Vocasek said. Beyond that, sampling in storage and in the bunk are important, too, but all may be to no avail without accurate labeling.

"Having a system where you can look at your feed identification and be able to figure out six, eight, nine months later what that

sample may contribute, that's really, really important," he said.

Once samples are in and tested, auditing data finds where errors or variability occur, along with why and how to make corrections.

"You want to quantify it, you want to put a number to it — wide or narrow — and you want to isolate it," Vocasek said. Then you can see, "instead of having to address the entire process from start to finish, what step in that process requires the most attention?"

Numbers alone may not reveal a problem that only shows up as a visual pattern once plotted. "Sometimes, you've got to look at data on a graph to see what it's really telling you," he said.

"This is just a part of business, like doing your taxes or looking at the balance sheet," the agronomist said. Any feedlot with at least 2,000 head could benefit from regular feed-testing, but small yards may not sample as often as the large ones. Most feedlots work with Servi-Tech through their own or a consulting nutritionist, he said.

"One of the most important things in producing beef is to have a consistent product," Vocasek said, noting a similarity at the feedlot. "We want to deliver a consistent mouthful of feed, every mouthful the same, and we want the animal to consume the entire thing."

The Feeding Quality Forum was sponsored by Purina, *Feedlot* magazine, Zoetis, Roto-Mix and Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB); more information is available at *www.feedingqualityforum.com.*

Editor's Note: *Katy Kemp is an industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*