



# Informing an Industry

## TCSCF wins CAB Progressive Partner Award.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

**W**hen the Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) started in 1982, the name was pretty self-explanatory. Much like many other feedout programs of the day, it covered a local geography and producers entered just a few head. The winner got a \$1,000 check and bragging rights for a year.

But early on, supervising area Extension livestock specialist Darrell Busby and the directing board of cow-calf producers saw greater potential.

“The real awakening was after the third year, when one of the board members had

won the \$1,000,” Busby remembers. “He said, ‘I think we should give the person in last place the \$1,000 so he could go out and buy a better bull.’”

From then on, the focus became identifying factors that influence profitability. Recognizing a history of cooperation with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) through its licensed feedlots, the brand named TCSCF the 2009 Progressive Partner of the Year. Busby accepted the honor on behalf of the TCSCF Cooperative and consignors, Iowa State University Extension and the 11 participating feedyards

## Progressive Partner Award

at the CAB annual conference in Scottsdale, Ariz., Sept. 18.

Vaccination and weaning programs may seem standardized now, but those were among the first recommendations to surface from the futurity’s growing database.

“It was really eye-opening that healthy, faster-gaining cattle would grade,” Busby says. “We were excited when we sorted that out.”

Now, more than 40 individual data points are collected on each animal entered. Everything is recorded, from breed type and birth date to temperament and carcass data, allowing for several after-the-fact analyses. These help everyone in the beef business.

“The thoroughness of the data gathered and managed by Darrell Busby and his counterparts adds much more potential for information than most futurities even begin to collect,” says Larry Corah, CAB vice president for supply development. “TCSCF has provided some invaluable information for the industry.”

There is literally no lower limit on consignment size, but as a practical matter, most participants send a stock trailer load or two, ranging all the way up to one ranch that places more than 700 head in futurity feedlots. Everyone gets the same reports and has equal opportunity to make changes in their herds.

“They learn over time, the more information they put into the system, the more information they get back out,” Busby says.

Of course, all the cattle are treated the same on feed.

### Tangible results

“All of the research work we have done has been retrospective. We try to do the best job we can with the cattle, and then we go back and ask ourselves why we see some differences,” he says. Noting the typical \$221 spread in profit between the top and bottom thirds in each group, Busby adds, “We are trying to knock off that bottom end, whether it is genetics or management, and get rid of that spread.”

TCSCF research pointed out that modified-live virus (MLV) vaccines are more effective than killed ones. Backed by history, the program advised preconditioning for



at least 30 days, preferring 45 days before cattle enter its feedlots. History would also reveal higher percentage Angus genetics had a direct correlation with better quality grade and other profit advantages.

"If you follow all the best management practices, the research shows you're going to get paid for retaining ownership," Busby says.

Those recommendations were virtual unknowns when the program started.

"Accessing this data answered a lot of questions for us," Corah says. "When we were putting together supply development activities 12 years ago, we didn't know how a lot of management factors impacted quality grade."

The program gave CAB a better understanding of how different practices could affect brand acceptance and ultimately a cattleman's bottom line.

"The Tri-County data is very likely the best documentation we've ever had related to the disposition of cattle and how that affects feedlot performance, health and carcass traits," Corah says.

CAB has helped with the data analysis, using the results in technical bulletins, articles and seminars.

"The Tri-County database is unique. It's beyond any other database we could have helped create or even touched, providing valuable knowledge for producers," he says. "It's amazing how often the research information that's been generated is cited in cattle conference presentations across the country."

### A coordinated effort

A big part of its strength is in the numbers. Starting with 105 head from 35 consignors, today there are 600 producers from 16 states and Canada sending cattle to the network of small Iowa feedyards. In 27 years, 70,433 head have been entered and recorded.

Sire data has been collected on nearly 900 sires with five or more progeny enrolled. That allows for ranking bulls on profitability.

From a research standpoint, streamlined processes and procedures across all cooperating feedlots offer another bonus. The number of feedlots may vary from 10 to 12 each year, and most are CAB licensees. One visiting consignor commented that TCSCF functions almost like one feedyard with a dozen locations. As one might guess, what differences there are between yards are recorded.

"The staff thinks we write way too many things down," Busby says with a smile. "Sometimes you need it to help you solve a problem that comes up later on."

Everything from processing time to

individual cost of gain helps the board members compare yards.

"A side benefit is that these feedlots have helped each other get better, too," Busby says. "They are really good at sharing what they are doing."

That's really the heart of the program. Cow-calf producers provide as much detail as they can, the feedlots report their information, and the futurity puts it all together. Then it's disseminated on an individual level back to all those parties and shared in general terms with the entire industry.

Busby insists it's not just about the livestock.

"This is about people helping each other solve problems and create opportunities," he says. "The good news is better management pays. It produces healthier, more docile cattle with a lower cost of production, along with higher-quality beef that earns a premium for the producer."

The TCSCF board includes seven cow-calf producers and a veterinarian in southwest Iowa: Nathan Mass, Darrell Stamp, Ron Dunphy, Paul Ackley, David Loutzenhiser, Russ Brandes, Kevin Brix and Doug Swain, veterinarian. They are joined by Jerry Sorenson of Fort Dodge Animal Health and Gary Fike, a beef cattle specialist for CAB.

Busby credits the staff, including Leann Tibken, Meg Groves, Jake Alden and Lacey Sleep as well as seven part-time employees and manager John Woltmann, who has been with TCSCF since 2006.

"All the important components — like receiving and carcass data collection — are coordinated by this team," Busby says. Continuing to spread credit where due, he lauds program coordinators in other states, usually affiliated with their state Extension

services. They help with recruiting, tagging, shipping and age and source verification.

"You learn something new every day," Woltmann says. "It's been interesting and fun. I've worked with a lot of good people from feedlots to CAB people to producers."

In high school, Woltmann actually entered a few of his 4-H steers when the program was in its infancy. "I never guessed it would have grown to the level it is today," he says.

Perhaps nobody could have predicted its success in volume or relevancy to the beef industry, but Corah credits individual leadership.

"The vision Darrell had for what this program could do — not only for cattle producers in Iowa, but across the U.S. — that's what drove it," Corah says. "I feel like we're also recognizing what he's accomplished."

Although Extension cuts are forcing the program to make adjustments, the board wants to continue growth. They plan to offer new reports and benchmarking as ways to keep serving their cow-calf customers.

"The board members have identified problems and concerns that they want to address by demonstrating there may be a better or more profitable way to do it," Busby says. "They know if you give people data they will produce more consistent cattle."

Nobody gets a \$1,000 winner's check anymore, but many producers who have implemented what they learned are reaping greater rewards. Now it's in a form more consistent with the real-world feeding environment: premiums paid for their end product.



► "All of the research work we have done has been retrospective. We try to do the best job we can with the cattle, and then we go back and ask ourselves why we see some differences," says Darrell Busby, who manages the data for TCSCF. Noting the typical \$221 spread in profit between the top and bottom thirds in each group, he adds, "We are trying to knock off that bottom end, whether it is genetics or management, and get rid of that spread."