

Data Duo Wins CAB Honors

Pratt QA pair keeps information flowing.

by *Miranda Reiman*

Without carcass data, cow-calf producers have no yardstick to measure progress in genetic selection for carcass merit. That's why Pratt Feeders LLC places a high priority on getting information back to its customers.

The Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot enrolls more than 16,000 head yearly in the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) database, among the highest volume participants of all licensed partner yards. Many other feedlots achieve high accuracy, but none beat the combination of volume and accuracy at the Pratt, Kan., yard.

The credit goes to a couple of employees who work "behind the scenes" — not sorting cattle or calling feedbunk rations. Jacque McMillan and Marty Patterson work in the office, taking the lead to make sure information is gathered and channeled to the right people.

CAB's Quality Assurance (QA) Officer of the Year award has always gone to someone at a CAB partner yard who best shows commitment to quality, attention to detail and dedication to the CAB program. This is the first time the award has been shared by co-winners: McMillan and Patterson.

Consistent, thorough and diligent

Gary Fike, CAB feedlot specialist, calls the duo "consistent, thorough and diligent." That's proven by their 96% rate of data capture, the ratio of how much information actually gets through the process from start to finish.

Typically, QA officers enroll cattle, arrange for data collection upon harvest and often return that information to their customers. Communication breakdowns or lack of focus at any stage can lead to lost data.

If a packing plant gets a request too late, the pen's carcass information could already be out of the system. If feedlots don't send in closeouts with average daily gain (ADG) and cost of gain, the information is less valuable to the entire FLP.

There are a host of other factors beyond the QA officer's control. Sometimes, packers neglect to get data on a pen of cattle, they collect it on the wrong group, or tag numbers are misread or entered in the wrong order. There are many other possible errors in the data collection and entry stages.

McMillan and Patterson work together as a team, along with general manager Jerry

Bohn, to "get it right." That 96% data-capture rate puts them well above the FLP database average of just more than 78%.

"We've emphasized from the beginning," Bohn says, "that to do this right, we had to get that data captured and back to the owner of the cattle. We have a role to play in helping our customers identify what they have, the genetics that are doing well and those that aren't doing so well. We have all just committed as a team to make that happen."

Nothing will stop the information from flowing if McMillan and Patterson can help it. They back up commitment with effectiveness.

"We have a system here, just within the folder set, for example," says McMillan, assistant controller and 10-year Pratt employee. "When we go to pull the folder, we know from day-to-day that they are CAB cattle, so we can get the data request quickly to CAB."

Bohn evaluates received cattle each month and Patterson, the yard's cattle clerk, enrolls them. She marks the folder as CAB, and then pulls those folders as cattle are set to ship.

"Just going out and finding details of what's going to ship the next day — as soon as you know, rather than waiting till the tail-end of the day, or even the next morning — is so important," says McMillan, who uses the Internet to request carcass data from CAB.

"Jacque's really good at what she does, so it helps me to make sure we get it all done right," says Patterson, who has been with Pratt for 8 years. "At least there are two of us to make sure everything's done correctly."

Routine teamwork

Those two even keep the boss straight, Bohn allows. "There's a system of checks and balances here. If I'm remiss on getting out there to get cattle identified, there's a note on my desk or a reminder," he says.



PHOTO BY LANCE ZIMMERMAN

► Marty Patterson (left) and Jacque McMillan work "behind the scenes" at Pratt Feeders to make sure carcass data information is gathered and channeled to the right people.

In a 40,000-head feedlot, tracking cattle is everybody's job. Once McMillan gets e-mail confirmation of her request for data, she prepares a copy to send with the mail the truckers receive. The packer also gets a fax containing a copy of the request, along with the scale ticket.

"It's like everybody finds out, in some way, multiple times. I think that probably is what helps — not missing any of those steps. It just gets to be routine," McMillan says.

Routine, yes, but never taken for granted. Carcass data is always a priority.

"We've set up a system that facilitates it pretty well," Bohn says. "Maybe I'm being too simplistic, but it's just what we do. We've chosen to identify that as something that's important, and Jacque and Marty have been real good about making sure it happens."

The office setup helps, too.

"We're in one great big room," McMillan says. "There's a lot of hollering back and forth across from one side of the room to the other and everybody seems to know their role and what all's going on. I would say it's a teamwork kind of environment."

Fike says their success has everything to do with personality, attention to detail and experience.

"They are extremely thorough and efficient in their duties of enrolling a huge volume of cattle and the required follow-up. Together, they probably know as much about the FLP as anyone in the business."