



Learning Together

Feedlots and cow-calf producers discover their profit potential.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

A number of cow-calf producers from across the U.S. sell their calves for \$5 a head. And they're happy about it.

From big herds or small, calves come in from 13 states to the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) in southwest Iowa. The program, which operates as a service cooperative, allows producers to feed their calves at Iowa feedlots and get carcass and performance data back on each animal.

The \$5 a head is just part of the logistics of the program that typically increases their bottom line in the end.

"I remember talking to some Georgia producers," says County Extension Director Bud Beedle, "and one said, 'You expect me to send my calves up there, four states away, and all you're going to give me is \$5 a head, and I'm never going to see them again?'"

"That's the way it works," Beedle says. "It gives the futurity ownership of the cattle. That way, we're able to feed the cattle all through the period before we send a feed bill to the owner."

TCSCF board member Jerry Sorensen says, "There are people who wouldn't have it any other way now."

The program today

It has worked since 1982, when the futurity evolved from a "glorified bragging-rights carcass contest" to the program it is today, says Beedle, longtime TCSCF supporter.

Repeat customers feed with the program because of information they get about their cattle between that \$5 sale and the time they receive the proceeds check.

"The target has always been people who are interested in knowing how much profitability their cattle have in the feedlot," says Darrell Busby, director of the TCSCF. The futurity weighs the cattle at four different times, and Busby and Beedle sort cattle into two harvest groups five weeks apart. They keep records on disposition and health, and all carcass and performance data is shared with producers.

"We go to extra pains to get all of that information," Sorensen says.

All calves are double-tagged upon entering the TCSCF yard.

"Identification is key. In all the years we have fed and done carcass work, we've only had two head that have lost both tags," Beedle says. "That's really the premise of this whole thing — keeping track of the identity so that the right data goes back to the right animal. Then that producer has solid information to make his decisions on."

The program also focuses on top-quality carcass data collection. The collection crew typically numbers six — one measuring backfat, two calculating ribeye area, a grader and two recorders.

"Darrell takes a lot of pride in training the people and makes sure they're well-qualified to do what we ask them to before we turn them loose," Beedle says.

From the feedlot printouts, data collectors know if they're missing even one head. "If there's a carcass that doesn't come through with our cattle," Beedle says, "we scrounge through the coolers and everywhere else until we find him."

They get this data at chain speed, seeing about 312 carcasses an hour.

"We have to do this with a crew that's trained well enough that they don't cause any problems at Tyson," Sorensen notes. "They have to go in and be inconspicuous, so we don't affect anything that's happening there. We're Tyson's guests."

The futurity charges cow-calf producers \$8 per head for this extra effort. The data collection fee is the only cost associated with having cattle in the futurity above and beyond normal yardage charges.

"Owners are involved, and they're retaining ownership and wanting information," Beedle says, "The data is really important to them, and they use it."

Southwest Iowa cow-calf producer and president of the TCSCF board Russ Brandes has made changes to his herd.

"I have used it to cull some females, and now I need to get real serious about culling

for disposition," he says. The futurity's disposition data shows aggressive cattle



Bud Beedle



Darrell Busby



► Jeff Clausen, owner-manager of Carson Feeders, recently became a TCSCF feeder and hopes to work with producers who want to use data to improve their herds.

grade and gain worse than their docile counterparts. “I’ve culled some of my bulls over the years based on performance information, too.”

He has been consigning cattle to TCSCF since 1985.

“I think I was one of the first ones to put my whole herd in,” Brandes says. “It was working so good on just a few head, there was no reason not to do it on the whole works.”

In the early 1990s, Busby tracked the progress that some Iowa producers made in their herds.

“You would see the herds change slowly,” he says. “Think about sire selection. If you’re running three bulls and you buy one every year, it’ll take some time to see genetic changes.”

All producers, regardless of size, have the opportunity to see the results of their genetic and management changes.

“I’m not sure cow herd size makes much difference in what we’re doing,” Busby says. “The board would like to be recognized as being size-neutral.”

Producers enter as few as a couple of head, and as many as a couple hundred head.

“These people come up in vans to see their cattle, and they’re excited,” says Sorensen, who works for Fort Dodge Animal Health. “Not only do they want to see them, they’re asking questions.”

The feedlot operators make sure they’re available to answer

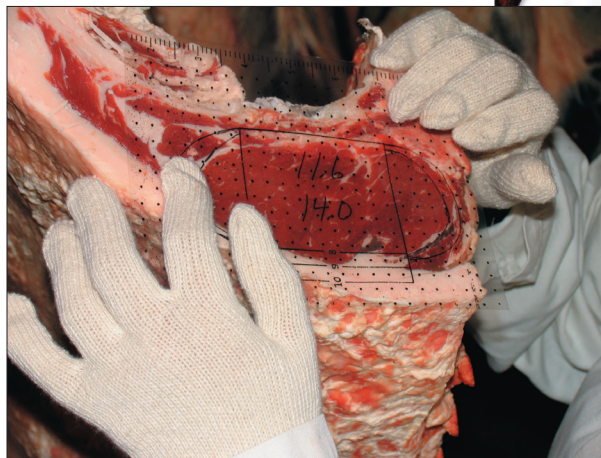
questions, too.

“You can’t be a recluse and feed for us, because you’re going to get lots of phone calls,” Sorensen says. “Those calves are always a phone call away.”

Beedle, who feeds 250 calves at his Oakland, Iowa, feedlot, knows that. “If they’re in Georgia and see a snowstorm went through southwest Iowa, they’ll call and ask, ‘How’s everything up there?’” Beedle doesn’t mind the calls.

“It’s kind of that family-to-family type communication,” he says.

That’s illustrated by the hospitality shown to the out-of-state tour groups. Producers go around to the feedlots and visit their cattle, but they are also hosted by the feedlot owners and their families for an evening meal. “All of the feedlot wives prepare side dishes,” Beedle says. “The bank we work with provides the steaks, and we grill out. We chat and get to know people.”



Customer-recruitment opportunity

The 10-member TCSCF board also gets involved. Made up of Iowa cow-calf producers, Extension personnel and allied industry representatives, the board has a keen interest in meeting with the visitors.

“They’re collecting information from both the feedlots and the consignors, but the consignors have a tremendous amount of influence on the direction of the futurity,” Busby says.

Oftentimes, feedlot owners and TCSCF board members are called on to help give presentations in other states.

“The board expects the feedlots to be promoters of the program,” Beedle says. Each TCSCF feedlot contributes to a general fund that supports travel to other states to recruit cattle. “We think it’s important when we go to other states that some of the feeders go along to meet these people and visit with them.”

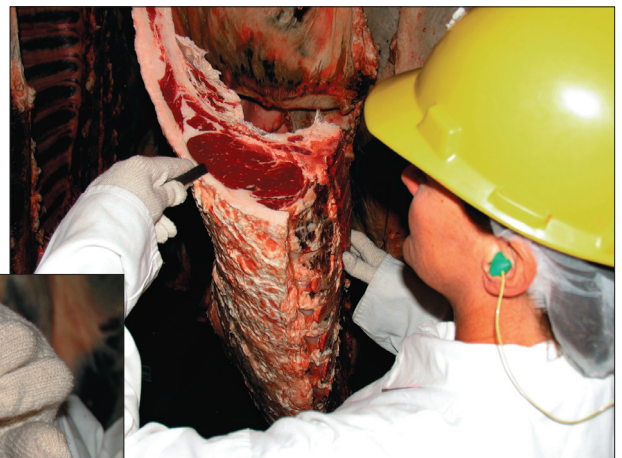
The feedlots see this customer-recruitment opportunity as one benefit to being involved in the program.

“With the futurity, I’m hoping to build some relationships where we’ll really see an advantage from the performance and carcass information,” says Jeff Clausen, owner-manager of Carson Feeders. He recently became a TCSCF feeder and hopes to be able to work with producers interested in using that data to improve their herds.

Clausen also looks forward to the networking between feedyards.

“We can pick up ideas and share ideas where you can make your operation better by seeing what some of the better producers are doing in the area,” he says.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 168



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As a result of his involvement in the futurity, the 1,800-head Carson, Iowa, feedlot became a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot in March.

"Through the futurity you can really see the difference in value on performance and carcass from one animal to the next," Clausen says. "You have to have your niche. I think finding those top animals that will make more money is a niche that will pay off in the long run.

"The consumer benefits from it, too, because we'll have a better beef product," he says.

Seven of the nine futurity yards are currently CAB-licensed. TCSCF yards typically have *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®])

Calves entering the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity must be:

- ▶ Treated for internal and external parasites
- ▶ Dehorned
- ▶ Bulls castrated
- ▶ Given modified-live vaccinations
- ▶ Weaned at least 28 days before delivery

acceptance rates well above the 15% average of the 65 licensed partners nationwide.

"Many of these feedlots have acceptance rates in the 30% and even 40% ranges," Gary Fike, CAB feedlot specialist, says. "Until the late 1960s, the Midwest was the center of cattle feeding, so these people had tons of experience in feeding cattle to a quality end point. Combine that with good genetics and relatively cheap feedstuffs and you have a recipe for quality that began here a long time ago and remains today."

Many of these feedlots credit the success of their business to the futurity.

"I've always considered one of the great attributes of Tri-County to be training feedlots to be commercial cattle feeders," Sorensen says.

Clausen agrees. "I think the futurity is a really good thing, and it's helping the beef industry, not only survive, but move ahead in southwest Iowa," he says. "It's making feedlots better custom feeders."

It took some time before the futurity got to this point of networking feedlots and recruiting progressive cow-calf producers.

The program started with 105 steers from 35 consignors in three counties in Iowa, thus

the name was born. It has grown, always under the direction of one dedicated leader.

"You have to give Darrell a lot of credit for insight, because he's got that vision," Beedle says. Much of that vision has shown up in the scores of research projects that Busby has developed while working with the futurity.

"Try to find a data set anywhere in the country that's more quoted than the information that's gleaned out of Tri-County," Sorensen says. From vaccination studies to data on percent Angus, Busby has authored or co-authored many research papers based on information tracked through the futurity.

The Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity is delivering data to people who want it, whether the small purebred producers in Indiana or the Southeast, large commercial operations in Iowa, or university and industry professionals interested in the multi-year studies.

Busby's goal is to add value for all those involved.

"We've always wanted to do things that add profit," he says. "That's how we started, and we've not strayed from that."

