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Putting Them to the Test

Feedouts provide education on performance beyond weaning and carcass quality on the rail.

by *Miranda Reiman*

Hundreds of cow-calf producers across the United States take time to sort off a few calves that won't move through their usual marketing routines. They'll get on a different trailer, bound for "school," or at least a learning experience for their owner.

Some cattlemen send their entire calf crops through these educational programs, so that they can graduate to produce better beef at home and, perhaps, feed their own pens in the future.

For many participants in "feedout" or futurity programs, these handfuls of cattle serve to represent the entire herd. Others use it as a way to market calves that would otherwise be discounted for small lot size at the sale barn. Regardless of the reason, producers who choose to enroll must do a little advance homework.

Often gathered at initial delivery points,

small groups of cattle are assembled and sent to universities or commercial feedlots for state and regional feedout programs. There are a couple dozen of these across the country operated by universities, cattlemen's groups or breed associations (see Table 1). They provide anywhere from a peek to a detailed view of a herd's progeny performance beyond weaning and carcass quality on the rail.

Programs yield data

"The biggest challenge of putting a set of steers on feed can be getting them weaned earlier than the rest of the herd and getting them preconditioned properly and to the yard," Greg Highfill, Extension beef specialist for Oklahoma State University, says. "It's out of their normal sequence and sometimes out of their comfort zone, but

it's such a crucial part of putting their cattle on feed."

Cattlemen go to this extra effort because it's the "price of getting data," he says. As a co-coordinator of the Oklahoma Steer Feedout, Highfill gets carcass data on nearly 150 calves in a spring-born test and 100 calves in a fall-born test each year.

"We pride ourselves in being an information feedback program — that's providing feedlot and carcass data for producers," he says. "However they can use that to improve their breeding program or make their program fit their marketing goals, that's our goal."

Producers can enter as many head as they want, in five-head increments. Many programs use that number as the minimum requirement.

"Everybody's goals are different. We

▶ **Above:** For feedout or futurity programs, small groups of cattle are assembled and sent to universities or commercial feedlots for state and regional feedout programs. They provide anywhere from a peek to a detailed view of a herd's progeny performance beyond weaning and carcass quality on the rail.

Table 1: Steer feedout programs listed with name, contact person, e-mail, phone number and physical address

Arkansas Steer Feedout Program; Brett Barham; bbarham@uaex.edu; 501-671-2162; PO Box 391; Little Rock, AR 72203	Contest; Ronna Morse; sca@sandhillscattle.com; 402-376-2310; PO Box 786; Valentine, NE 69201
Beef Empire Steer Test (BEST); Ron Hale; rhale@oznet.ksu.edu; 620-275-9164; 4500 E. Mary St.; Garden City, KS 67846	Oklahoma Steer Feedout; Greg Highfill; ghifi@okstate.edu; 580-237-7677; 316 E. Oxford; Enid, OK 73701
Kansas Angus Association Carcass Data Project; Mark Lampe; kansasangus@wbsnet.org; 5201 E. Rd. 110; Scott City, KS; 67871	South Dakota Calf-Value Discovery Program; Cody Wright; cody.wright@sdstate.edu; 605-688-5448; Box 2170; Brookings, SD 57007
Eastern North Dakota Cattle Feedout; Karl Hoppe; karl.hoppe@ndsu.edu; 701-652-2951; PO Box 219; Carrington, ND 58421	South Carolina; Rusty Thomson; rthmsn@clemson.edu; 864-429-7062; 2390 Thomason Qtr. Rd.; Sharon, SC 29742
Georgia Beef Challenge; Patsie Cannon; ptcannon@uga.edu; 229-386-3683; PO Box 748, 4603 Research Way; Tifton, GA 31793	Tennessee Beef Evaluation; Emmit Rawls; erawls@utk.edu; 865-974-7271; 317A Morgan Hall, 2621 Morgan Circle; Knoxville, TN 37996
Indiana Beef Evaluation and Economics Feeding Program (IBEEF); Kern Hendrix; khendrix@purdue.edu; 765-494-4832; Purdue University, Lilly Hall; Department of Animal Sciences, 915 W. State St.; West Lafayette, IN 47907	Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity; Darrell Busby; dbusby@iastate.edu; 712-769-2600; 53020 Hitchcock Ave.; Lewis, IA 51544
Kentucky; Doug Shepherd; dshepher@uky.edu; 270-765-4121; 201 Peterson Dr.; Elizabethtown, KY 42701	Virginia Retained Ownership Program; Scott Greiner; sgreiner@vt.edu; 540-231-9159; 366 Litton Reaves Hall; Blacksburg, VA 24061
Missouri Steer Feedout Program; Eldon Cole; colee@missouri.edu; 417-466-3102; PO Box 388; Mount Vernon, MO 65712	Montana Beef Network; Andrew Kellom; akellom@montana.edu; 406-994-5588; 110 Marsh Lab, MSU; Bozeman, MT 59715
Nebraska IRM Test; Ivan Rush; irush1@unl.edu; 308-632-1245; 4502 Ave. I; Scottsbluff, NE 69361	California State University, Fresno; Randy Perry; randyp@csufresno.edu; 559-278-4793; 5241 N. Maple Ave.; Fresno, CA 93740
New Mexico Ranch to Rail Program; Manny Encinias; mencia@nmsu.edu; 505-374-2566; Box 3003 MSC 3AE; Las Cruces, NM 88003	North Dakota Angus Association Steer Feedout; Pete Best; bestangus@yahoo.com; 701-483-4616; 19030 118th Ave. N.W.; Watford City, ND 58854
New York Feedlot and Carcass Value Discovery Program; Mike Baker; mjb28@cornell.edu; 607-255-5923; 130 Morrison Hall; Cornell; Ithaca, NY 14853	Minnesota Carcass Merit Program; Grant Crawford; craw0105@umn.edu; 320-234-0441; 1390 Hwy. 15 S. Suite 201; Hutchinson, MN 55350
Sandhills Cattle Association's Educational, Performance & Carcass	

provide the steer feedout program so producers can establish a benchmark for where their cow herd is," Highfill says. "Most of our producers are trying to increase their average daily gain (ADG) and their number of Choice cattle."

In the Northeast, the New York Carcass Value Discovery Program, operated by Cornell University, serves the entire region. Brian Cowburn, a producer from Ulysses, Pa., says it has helped him make decisions on his farm.

"You don't really have an idea of what

you have until you go through a program like this. It's really good," he says. "It helps you to pick and choose bulls and find out which cows are producing better calves. It gave me an idea of what I had and what I needed to do to improve."

Since he first participated in 2004, Cowburn has started using artificial insemination (AI) and likes the results. His farm includes 60 females, half commercial and half registered Angus.

"I've just been selling feeder calves, but I am trying to get started in the registered

business, selling bulls and replacement heifers," he says.

Cornell also offers a bull test and a heifer development program that may help Cowburn in the future.

"Several producers participate in all three programs," says Mike Baker, beef cattle Extension specialist for Cornell. "The whole purpose of the program is to expose producers to the feeding and packing industries. Even more important is the data we generate that they can use in their herds."

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Table 2: Comparison of carcass characteristics of the top five groups vs. the bottom five groups

Hot carcass wt., lb.	QG	CAB	YG	HCW	Adj. grid value/cwt., \$	Carcass value, \$
	----- premium/discount, \$ -----					
Carcass characteristics of the top five groups:						
746	\$2.80	\$2.50	\$1.70	\$1.45	\$108.45	\$813.39
722	\$0.00	\$3.33	\$2.67	\$1.25	\$107.25	\$773.68
723	\$0.00	\$1.50	\$3.60	\$1.80	\$106.90	\$772.68
669	\$1.71	\$2.86	\$2.86	-\$1.57	\$105.86	\$712.14
686	\$2.80	\$2.00	-\$1.20	\$1.20	\$104.80	\$717.80
Carcass characteristics of the bottom five groups:						
811	-\$4.00	\$0.00	-\$6.67	\$2.50	\$91.83	\$744.01
802	-\$2.00	\$0.00	-\$9.00	\$1.88	\$90.88	\$723.08
795	-\$2.00	\$0.00	-\$9.75	\$2.63	\$90.88	\$720.16
859	\$0.00	\$0.00	-\$10.17	-\$0.17	\$89.67	\$758.61
833	-\$1.60	\$0.00	-\$12.00	\$1.80	\$88.20	\$729.97
Carcass characteristics, average of all groups analyzed:						
768	-\$2.36	\$0.80	-\$0.02	\$1.40	\$99.84	\$763.93

Note: More than 1,500 cattle from scores of producers were evaluated in the 11 educational feeding futurity programs that returned 2006 data. This table shows the average, top and bottom groups in terms of carcass characteristics and value. Note that some of the highest grid-value groups had only moderate overall carcass value, surpassed by some of the lowest grid-value groups. The lesson is to produce cattle that do it all.

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Like most programs of this type, Cornell publishes preconditioning guidelines that cattlemen must follow before entering animals in the test. Some standard procedures include being weaned 30 days and having a round of vaccinations.

Making informed decisions

While some producers send all their calves to be finished in the feedout, others use it to benchmark their herds. That's why Brent Barham, Arkansas Steer Feedout coordinator, says it's important for producers to enroll a representative sample.

"I encourage them to send one or two of their best and randomly pick the other calves because some people like to use this as a test for retained ownership," he says. "If you pick your best five, you might get a false sense of security on what your whole herd would do."

The feedout programs can be like training wheels for feeding.

"A number of our ranchers have gone on to feed, or have outgrown us, so to speak," Highfill says. "They use us as testing grounds."

Universities and state cattle associations

can also use the data they collect to gauge what the industry is doing. The Arkansas summary report gives a detailed review of the average, top and bottom 25% for everything from financials to carcass results.

Analysts use a model to determine what factors most affected feedlot net returns. In the 2005-2006 report, quality was the most significant variable.

"Quality grade is always significant and in the top five," Barham says. "For any cattle sold on a grid, it would be one of the most important factors. You'd have to go back before that marketing method to find when some of the weight factors would have been consistently most important."

The report suggests management tips as take-home messages: "Carcass traits such as marbling are highly heritable; therefore, selecting high-marbling-EPD (expected progeny difference) bulls can be effective for improving marbling ability in their calves."

Other strategies include avoiding extremely large- or small-framed calves. They will marble at different actual ages because of their variations in physiological

age or maturity, making it hard to feed a whole pen uniformly.

Initial weight and hot carcass weight held spots two and three in the net-return list, followed by yield grade and medicine cost.

"Extension specialists try to emphasize the importance of a good health program, but sometimes people don't get it until they experience it for the first time," Barham says. "Health is one of those things. You can do the best job of giving the correct vaccinations and backgrounding, but there's still no guarantee you won't have a problem. At least you knew you did everything possible to prevent it."

The big picture

Barham and others often compare data from year to year, but they're careful not to make too much of it. Newcomers and "graduates" change the demographic of the program, and other variables, such as weather and markets, can affect the results.

To get a comprehensive snapshot of all the feedouts across the U.S., Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) collected data from 11 of them. Using the contest grid established

from the former National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC), all groups of four head or more were sorted based on that adjusted grid value. The formula takes into account carcass weight, quality grade and yield grade.

Grid values showed a range of \$20.25 per hundredweight (cwt.), from an \$11.80-per-cwt. discount to the high premium of \$8.45 per cwt.

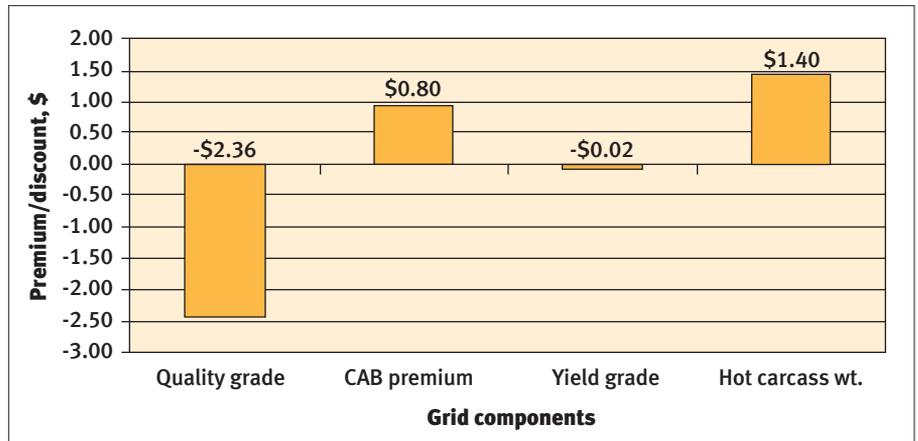
Those top calves comprised a 10-head group of steers and heifers that made 80% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) and Prime. They gained 3.3 pounds (lb.) per day and had a feed-to-gain ratio of 6.7-to-1.

The grand summary revealed an average hot carcass weight of 768 lb., about 40 lb. below the national average weight. As a whole, the 11-feedout average received a 16¢ discount on the grid, mostly due to shortcomings in quality grade.

“There were some really exceptional cattle fed in these programs,” says Mark McCully, CAB director of supply development, “but this tells me, as a whole, we need to increase our marbling and quality grades.”

CAB will continue to collect this data with

Fig. 1: Average premium or discount (\$/cwt.) by trait



Note: Most Angus-influence cattle in the 11 futurities reporting 2006 data saw discounts for inadequate quality grade, but premiums for carcass weight. Approximately 16% were accepted for the CAB brand, and that was enough to lift overall average CAB premiums to \$0.80 per hundredweight (cwt.). Yield grade was a neutral factor in this data set.

hopes of increasing the number reporting each year.

“We’d like to be able to use this information to identify some of the really great herds out there today that haven’t been highlighted,” he says.

Table 1 includes contact information on all feedouts that responded to a national survey. To learn more about them or to shed light on another feedout for high-quality cattle, contact your local Extension agent or visit www.cabpartners.com. 