

2017 CATTLE INDUSTRY CONVENTION & TRADE SHOW

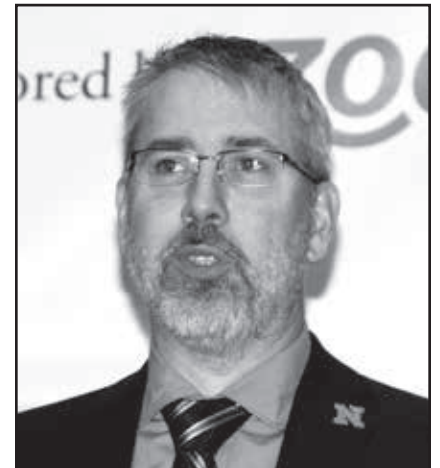
The Future of Cattle Feeding

Geography, size and timing will affect cattle feeders significantly in the future.

by **TROY SMITH**, *field editor*

What does the future hold for the cattle-feeding segment of the beef industry? Where and how will cattle be fed? How will they be marketed? What challenges lie ahead for cattle feeders?

These were the questions posed to University of Nebraska Beef Feedlot Extension Specialist Galen Erickson during a Cattlemen's College® session hosted at the 2017 Cattle Industry Convention in Nashville, Tenn. Lacking a crystal ball and claiming to be armed only with training in ruminant nutrition plus his power of observation, Erickson shied away from long-term predictions. However, he said the current state of cattle feeding and certain trends may offer a glimpse of what lies ahead, at least in the near future.



“Economics favor feeding cattle longer, rather than marketing them sooner and replacing them with expensive feeder cattle. There is no price slide on fed cattle, so cattle fed to heavy weights make more money,” said Galen Erickson, University of Nebraska ruminant nutritionist.

Reviewing the feedlot sector's basic needs — things like feeder-cattle supplies, feedstuffs, water, energy, labor and markets — Erickson said climate is likely to become more important in the future because of its relationship to temperature extremes, precipitation, and feed and water supplies. While there has been some increase in housed feeding operations in areas of less favorable weather conditions, Erickson believes the vast majority of cattle will be fed in open-lot facilities. Thus, geography matters.

Size matters, too. While some people have questioned whether the trend toward ever-heavier finished weights can continue, Erickson sees no reason yet for that to change.

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sooner and replacing them with expensive feeder cattle. There is no price slide on fed cattle, so cattle fed to heavy weights make more money," said Erickson, who expects

that trend to continue until cost of gain decreases or fed-cattle prices increase significantly.

According to Erickson, there has been some increase in numbers of

cattle sold on the basis of hot carcass weight, rather than on a live-weight basis, and long feeding periods have been positive for quality grade.

"At least for the near future, I

think the focus will continue to be on bigger, fatter cattle," affirmed Erickson.

This is also likely to continue having an effect on numbers of cattle placed as yearlings vs. calf-feds. Bigger in means bigger out, so Erickson expects a preference for yearlings to continue.

Industry-wide, rates for morbidity and mortality have been creeping upward, despite modern treatment protocols. Erickson called health management a big problem for feeders. However, some small feedlots whose lower numbers make marketing more challenging have been converted to backgrounding operations. He believes more small feeders may find opportunity in handling calves, straightening out health issues and readying the animals for a finishing yard.

With regard to environmental regulations, Erickson expects the primary concerns for feedlots to be related to management of manure nutrients, feedlot runoff, air quality and antibiotic resistance.

It is sometimes argued that more but smaller feedlots would be more environmentally friendly than fewer large feedlots. He believes large feedlots make more sense for the future. He offered a hypothetical comparison scenario to illustrate his view.

"If you have one 10,000-head feedlot, it is going to be required to control runoff. The same number of cattle could be fed in a hundred 100-head feedlots, but feeding operations that small are not required to control runoff," said Erickson. "Which is better for the environment?"

Lastly, Erickson predicted that U.S. cattle feeders will continue to focus on producing the highest-quality beef.

"That's been our niche," he stated, "and I see no reason that would change."

Editor's Note: Field Editor Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb. This article was written as part of Angus Media's coverage of the 2017 Cattle Industry Convention. For further coverage, visit www.angus.media.

