



## Iowa cattle feeder creates program to help customers improve herds, profits; takes information sharing to whole new level.

Story & photos by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

**B**efore you buy a bull, figure out what you're going to do with the calf." With 45 years of cattle-feeding experience, David Trowbridge says that's the No. 1 advice he gives commercial producers.

The longtime manager at Gregory Feedlots, Tabor, Iowa, has spent much of his career helping cattlemen match their calf crop to the right market at the right time. His second piece of advice is more of a hard-learned truth: Not all cattle are worth the same price.

"If you're going to spend \$8,000 for a good bull, you'd better figure out that your calves are worth more money than the guy who is buying a

\$2,000 bull and taking them to the sale barn the same day as you are," says Trowbridge.

There's no way to know for sure unless you have data in hand, he explains. The power of information extends beyond one year's feeder calves and informs future decisions.

"We want to help you make your cattle so good, you can't afford to sell them," Trowbridge says.

Above: "I would say about 50% of the cattle in the country give up some kind of premium because we're just sellers, we're not marketers. We need to be marketers," says David Trowbridge, Gregory Feedlots.

### Switch to custom-feeding

It's an unofficial motto that grew out of a dual-purpose need. Gregory Feedlots was transitioning from the investor model and saw information sharing as a customer recruitment tool. At the same time, Trowbridge saw cattlemen were hungry for data.

In the late 1980s, Reagan-era tax laws caused a shift in the ability to "write off" losses, so investing in feeding cattle became an even riskier idea. Trowbridge and owners Jim and Grant Gregory saw the need for more involvement from the cattle producers and responded quickly.

They established the Gregory



Performance Management Program to help cattlemen move from being commodity price-takers to participating in a premium beef production model.

## The program

“We can see which sires, which dams, which breeding programs, which management programs are the most profitable for that particular operation,” Trowbridge says.

His team in the office takes in all the records, in whatever form it’s easiest for the producer to relay.

The feedyard captures weights at four different points — including at harvest — to calculate individual feed efficiency and average daily gain. They then combine that with the carcass data and calculate that back out to a retail value per average days on feed (RVAD), or the marketable boxed-beef production per day during the feeding period.

In addition, they’ll match up all inputted on-farm records they get.

“We use as much information as the producer will give us,” Trowbridge says.

Common points include sire and dam information, nutritional programs, and vaccine or treatment records.

At the end of the feeding period, customers get a report detailing each animal’s total carcass value and carcass gain. The dollars are adjusted back to a common price equivalent, to take out the variation in



David Trowbridge and Shelby Oldenkamp are a good team at Gregory Feedlots. The manager and his outside cattle manager keep everyone’s cattle cared for and the records accurate.

time of sale. Then individual animals are ranked on the RVAD. Based on RVAD, the animals are grouped into top 10%, top 60%, bottom 40% and bottom 10%.

“If your bottom 10% performed up to the level of the top 60%, you’d make a lot more, usually several hundred dollars per head,” Trowbridge says.

That level of improvement requires action at the ranch level, he says.

## No two head the same

Genetic differences are very apparent, so that’s the place to start making progress, Trowbridge notes.

“There’s a million ways I can mess your cattle up, but I can’t make [them] any better than they are. They are what they are,” he says.

Trowbridge doesn’t give specific advice on bloodlines or breed type, but sometimes the report speaks for itself.

“The biggest thing people use the data for is to look at sire analytics and to make decisions on it,” Trowbridge says. “We’ve sold a lot of Angus bulls — not on purpose, but because when you look across

the board and what you’re seeing on premiums.”

There’s good and bad in every breed, and information helps producers weed out the latter, says Trowbridge. “You’ve just got to do your due diligence and find out what is going to work for you.”

No two operations have the same goals, resources or skills, Trowbridge says, but there are some blanket management recommendations that apply to most everybody.

“People want to wean them and then rough them, but that’s the cheapest gain of their life,” he explains.

Weaning 45 days on a high-energy ration is a must, but pushing it out further is usually a boon to the cattle owner.

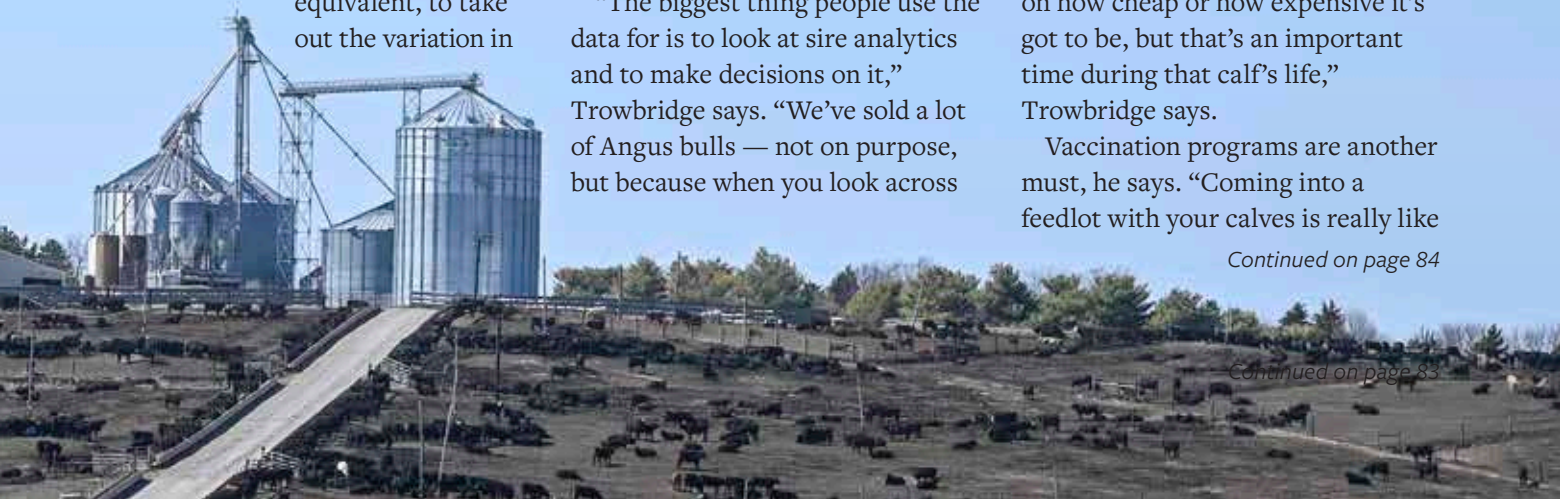
“If they have the skill and the resources to feed them longer, they should.”

Of course, it must pencil out, too. “Everybody’s got a different idea on how cheap or how expensive it’s got to be, but that’s an important time during that calf’s life,” Trowbridge says.

Vaccination programs are another must, he says. “Coming into a feedlot with your calves is really like

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going to kindergarten. You need to get those calves programmed, because they will get exposure to all these different diseases and will come down with things if they are not protected.”

They’ve sorted the finish data based on which groups were creep-fed, had a specific mineral program or came from supplemented mamas.

“We’ll really customize it to each producer,” he says.

### From near and far

Trowbridge used to travel quite often to work on customer relations, but many come by “word of mouth” today.

Brent Gamble and his father have sent cattle from their Morriston, Fla., ranch to Gregory Feedlots for nearly two decades.

“We use that information when we go to pick out replacement heifers on how the dams have done, and then we know who to breed them to,” Gamble says. “We just continue gradually getting better and better each time.”

His dad originally sought out the Iowa feedyard specifically for the chance to capture data back. The cattle started out very average for their region for the time — around 50% Choice — and have improved. Recent loads reached as high as 100% Choice and above, with nearly one-third of them hitting the Prime grade.

“We’re definitely moving in the right direction, and the data, it helps,” Gamble notes.

### Near and far

Those Florida calves travel more than 1,300 miles to get to Gregory Feedlots, but they may be in the



“We want to help you make your cattle so good, you can’t afford to sell them,” says Trowbridge, who focuses on custom-feeding.

neighboring pen to calves from Nichols Farms, just down the road at Bridgewater, Iowa.

Every year since the mid-90s, Ross Havens, marketing manager for the registered Angus and Simmental operation, has sent Trowbridge the calves that don’t continue in their breeding programs.

“We have all the information on them — birth dates, birth weights, 205-[day] weights, sire and dam — we could put together so they can track it through the programming,” Havens says.

Carcass data is matched on an individual basis, and is turned in as phenotypes to the American Angus Association.

They can draw multiyear conclusions on sire groups and varying management programs, and they have researched prevention of bovine respiratory disease (BRD) together. Yet, the main reason Havens sends the backgrounded

calves to Gregory Feedlots is competition on fed cattle.

“David does all our marketing, and that’s a big advantage of them. You know 250 to 270 head, I’m going to have a tough time even getting a buyer to come here,” he says. “David’s got buyers in there every week and has those relationships, so we can concentrate on what we do good, and they concentrate on what they do good.”

### The good cattle are getting better

Trowbridge uses history and four decades of training his

eye to help determine market readiness. Even small pens of cattle will be sorted three or four times into ideal marketing groups.

“Visual appeal of those cattle is still a big deal,” Trowbridge says.

“The other thing about knowing the genetics and knowing how the cattle are going to perform from past experience, it gives you so much flexibility in marketing,” he says.

In the era of inflated corn prices, that’s important because they can shorten up days on feed (DOF) to cheapen up feed cost without losing the marbling premiums.

The good cattle, there’s more of them around these days, Trowbridge says.

“It’s pretty hard to go backward with Angus,” he says. “I see a lot of people who are more interested in their data than they are profitability. They want that information; it’s worth more to them.”

Applying what they know has changed their herds over time.

“They’ve made a lot of genetic progress in their cattle,” he says. |